MENG XI SHI
Thousand Autumns
QIAN QIU
2

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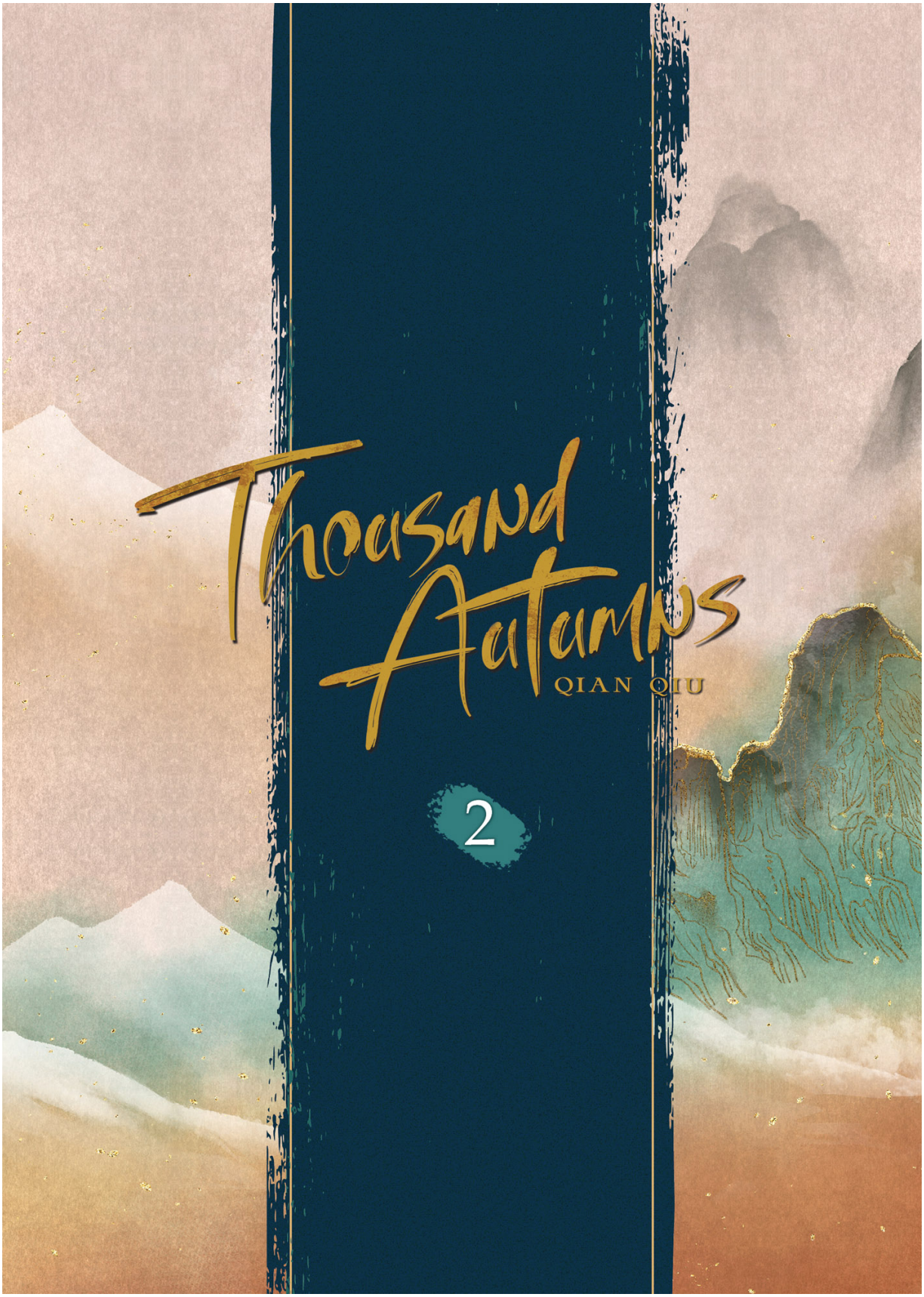
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Chapter 32:
Sword Intent

FACING THE ASTONISHED GAZES of the crowd, Shen Qiao remained utterly calm. “This Shen is no longer the sect leader. I fear I must disappoint you, Duan-xiong.”

Of course Duan Wenyang knew who Shen Qiao was—Duan Wenyang was the one who’d sent the message challenging Shen Qiao to duel Kunye.

Duan Wenyang was Kunye’s shixiong, but his social status among the Göktürks was lower than Kunye’s because of his Han blood. That was why Kunye had represented Hulugu in the duel and Duan Wenyang had not.

Duan Wenyang laughed. “Sect Leader Shen is truly an outstanding hermit—one who does his seclusion in the cities! Given your moral prestige, I fear even the people of Chunyang Monastery would have to defer to you if they knew your identity! Why the need to attend this party under the pretext of Sect Leader Yan’s name? Unless the rumors around the jianghu are true? They say you have a deep relationship with Sect Leader Yan and are always together.”

No one had expected this. They’d come to celebrate a birthday but were treated to two full-blown, back-to-back dramas instead.

The room was abuzz: every guest was watching Shen Qiao, indescribable amazement written on their faces. Even Puliuru Jian, sitting beside him, was stunned and turned to look at him.

After Shen Qiao had fallen from the cliff, he was nowhere to be found, either alive or dead. Everyone guessed that he might have felt guilty for Xuandu Mountain’s sake and was too ashamed to appear in public again, so had chosen to conceal his identity. Maybe he was even living in the mountains as a recluse. They absolutely hadn’t expected him to appear at a birthday banquet thrown by a noble family of Northern Zhou.

Li Qingyu scrutinized Shen Qiao carefully, and disappointment filled his heart.

When Li Qingyu had gone to Xuandu Mountain, he'd been regretful that he couldn't duel Shen Qiao. But now, looking at the man's frail, emaciated appearance, his regret grew even deeper. He no longer lamented that he'd lost a rival, though. He lamented that this rival was unworthy of his rivalry.

Shen Qiao remained silent, not answering any of Duan Wenyang's questions.

Madam Qin sighed and removed her ring, passing it to her son. "This originally belonged to Hulugu, and times have changed—the object is still here, but the person no longer is. It should be returned to its original owner. Take it."

She'd come from a prestigious family, yet had gone all the way to the Göktürks to find a master, and she'd formed a deep connection with Hulugu. For as long as they could remember, Su Wei and Su Qiao had always thought that their mother was only an ordinary noble lady who shared a close and loving relationship with their father. Now, as they heard the complicated emotions in their mother's voice, it dawned on them that her relationship with Hulugu went beyond that of a normal master and disciple.

And Hulugu himself was even stranger. He'd lost his keepsake, but instead of coming to retrieve it, he'd loitered for more than thirty years. Only now, with Duan Wenyang's appearance, had these past affairs been finally revealed to the public.

Su Qiao was racked with anxiety, but he couldn't press the issue, given where they were at the moment. He could only take the ring and hand it to a subordinate, who passed it on to Duan Wenyang.

Once he'd received the ring, Duan Wenyang performed the Göktürks' salute. "This one is deeply grateful for Madam Qin's understanding and principles. With this keepsake, I can settle things for my master."

"How did Hulugu pass away?" asked Madam Qin.

Duan Wenyang sighed. "In his search for the union of man and heaven, my master secluded himself, seeking a breakthrough. He ordered us not to enter or disturb him for three years. The moment that time was up,

we went in to check on him. Unexpectedly, we discovered that his esteemed self had already passed away while sitting in meditation."

The more elderly people present at the banquet still remembered Hulugu's ambitious sweep of the Central Plains' experts long ago, before Qi Fengge had finally stopped him. He was a grandmaster of his generation, yet in the end he, too, had been carried away on the wind. From now on, no matter what storms surged within the jianghu, they'd have no connection to Hulugu or Qi Fengge.

The talented and the gifted scattered in the winds, leaving sighs and lamentations in their wake.

Madam Qin was silent. None could say what she was thinking.

Su Wei and Su Qiao still hated that Duan Wenyang had ruined their mother's birthday banquet, and they no longer bothered with niceties. "Since you have the ring, we ask your distinguished self to leave the Su residence at once!"

"Don't be in a rush to drive me away, sirs," said Duan Wenyang. "I came to you to ask for someone."

Su Qiao, thinking he was going to pull something else on his mother, said coldly, "We don't have anyone you want here."

Duan Wenyang laughed. "Su-erlang hasn't even heard the question before refusing. Relax, I mean no harm to Madam Qin. Now that the ring's been returned, my master's wish has been fulfilled, so of course I won't trouble her any further. Taspar Khagan commanded me to look for someone, and that is whom I'm seeking."

Su Wei said, "Then you should say so to His Majesty. The Su residence is but a small temple, it cannot accommodate a great buddha like you! Guards, escort him out!"

"Wait!" said Duan Wenyang. "Does the Duke of Meiyang County have a younger sister who married Yuan Xiong? We have enmity with this man. The Khagan[1] orders that I bring him and his entire family back to the Khaganate to be dealt with, if there is to be an alliance between us and the Zhou. And so, I ask the Duke of Meiyang County to please hand them over!"

Su Wei’s expression fell.

In fact, the family Duan Wenyang spoke of was his cousin’s. His cousin’s husband Yuan Xiong had offended the Göktürks, and the family was deathly afraid that they would use the alliance to ask for them. They’d fled to Su Wei’s house, and Su Wei had secretly taken them in. But he hadn’t expected that Duan Wenyang would discover this news and come knocking on his door, relentlessly in pursuit.

“I know not where they’ve gone,” said Su Wei. “If you’re looking for someone, go seek them out yourself. It has nothing to do with the Su residence!”

“I ask the Duke of Meiyang County to please not make things so difficult for me,” said Duan Wenyang. “I came to your house to ask you for them out of consideration for the deep connection between Madam Qin and my master. Otherwise, I would have reported this matter directly to Your Majesty and waited for the Lord of Zhou’s decree. But I fear that would embarrass your esteemed residence.”

Su Qiao was furious. “You specifically chose the day of my mother’s birthday to swagger about. First you asked for the ring, and we gave it to you. Now that we’ve given you an inch, you’re taking a mile? Do you think the Su family is afraid of you? If we say they’re not here, they’re not here! Get out!”

Duan Wenyang, too, lost his smile. He narrowed his eyes at Su Qiao and said slowly, “I heard that Su-erlang is a disciple of Chunyang Monastery, so your skills must be extraordinary. Since we happened to meet today, I would like to ask you for some pointers!”

Su Qiao sneered. “Well, well, the fox’s tail is finally exposed! You clearly came to cause a scene, yet you’ve put on such an innocent act. You came to us yourself, so don’t go crying and tattling to your Göktürk Khagan if you leave here dead or disabled!”

As soon as he’d spoken, he was lunging at Duan Wenyang.

His lunge wasn’t without form or method—rather, it complemented his sword techniques. His body flowed as he willed it, the movements bold and beautiful. Right away, someone shouted, “Spectacular!”

Faced with Su Qiao's swordplay, as brilliant as snow, Duan Wenyang remained completely composed. He didn't back up, only waited until Su Qiao's sword glare had swept in great swathes until it was directly in front of him, then he reached right into it, empty-handed.

When his hand touched the shining blade, it wasn't ground into pieces by the sword glare—he held it, dead in place.

Everyone stared at the sight of them, at Duan Wenyang's right hand firmly clamped onto the blade as he gently rotated his wrist. It didn't look like he used much strength, but the blade bounced and whined.

Su Qiao's sword nearly flew from his hand.

An expression of disbelief appeared on his face.

His martial arts didn't compare to his shidi Li Qingyu's, but he'd still ascended into the ranks of the first-rate. Never before had he experienced a situation where he stood on the precipice of defeat almost as soon as a fight began.

Could it be because his opponent was Hulugu's disciple and so was on a different level entirely?

Su Qiao refused to accept this. He rapidly changed tactics. Without staying still for even a moment, he withdrew his hand and backed up several steps, then made a sharp turn with the help of a pillar. He lobbed a sword glare combined with true qi at Duan Wenyang's face while gathering power in his other palm and then striking at him with that as well.

"It's too cramped in here," said Duan Wenyang. "It's hampering the fun of the fight!" Duan Wenyang didn't take the attack straight on. Instead, he laughed brightly and turned around, leaping for an exit to get outside.

Su Qiao was in hot pursuit, and the two of them fought from within the house to without. In a split second, sword glares were firing everywhere while forebodingly cold air roiled around them. Naturally, the guests went outside to watch.

One man's sword glares were as harsh as the surging rapids, swallowing everything as they rushed forward, while the other man remained barehanded, wandering within the sword glares. It seemed that Duan Wenyang constantly teetered on the edge of disaster, his situation as

precarious as a house of cards, yet time and time again he pulled through by the skin of his teeth. It was a breathtaking sight for the guests. Some, like Princess Qingdu, knew no martial arts and were unwilling to watch the bloodshed. They chose to remain in the house with Madam Qin, who hadn't left either.

The laymen were watching for the excitement, while the professionals were watching for reference. The spectators whose martial arts were beyond a certain level realized that even though Duan Wenyang looked like he was treading on thin ice, in reality he held the upper hand.

Puliuru Jian made a sound of surprise, then whispered to Shen Qiao, "From how I see it, Su-erlang is being toyed with."

Shen Qiao nodded. "I feel the same."

Hearing him say that, Puliuru Jian couldn't help but ask curiously, "Shen-xiong, you can see?"

Shen Qiao smiled. "I might not be able to see, but I can hear."

"How can you hear what's happening?"

"The swing of a sword, their true qi, footsteps, and even breathing: these all have sound. If you're blind, your ears will become even sharper. Duan Wenyang wants to observe Chunyang Monastery's martial arts, so he isn't rushing to decide the battle. It's a pity that Su Qiao hasn't realized it. He's under Duan Wenyang's sway now."

It definitely couldn't be only Shen Qiao and Puliuru Jian who'd realized what was happening. But since there wasn't yet a clear winner to the battle, if anyone rashly intervened, first it'd affect the fairness of the match, which was disgraceful, and secondly, it would look like they were patronizing Su Qiao. Hence, even his shidi Li Qingyu could do nothing but wait quietly for the conclusion to arrive.

When Puliuru Jian heard Shen Qiao's answer, he said thoughtlessly, "Since Kunye and Duan Wenyang are both Hulugu's disciples, who's the stronger one?"

Only once the words were out did he realize they were somewhat inappropriate. He quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to bring up Shen-xiong's painful memories!"

Shen Qiao laughed. “It’s fine. Though Kunye is strong, the harsh arrogance of his martial arts means they’re not as carefree and untrammeled as Duan Wenyang’s. In my opinion, I believe that Duan Wenyang is closer to capturing the heart of his master’s martial arts, and so he’s a couple of notches above Kunye.”

Puliuru Jian grew serious. “If that’s true, then I fear that this man didn’t only come to the Su residence today to ask for the keepsake, or the family of Su-langjun’s cousin, but also to make a name for himself.”

Shen Qiao nodded. “I was thinking the same.”

Those with experience in jianghu made up more than half of the birthday banquet’s guests, on account of Su Qiao’s presence. Among these, many were experts from the younger generation, like Li Qingyu, and they could likely compete for a spot in the top ten rankings. If Duan Wenyang defeated them, that would mean that he was stronger, and the effect would reverberate throughout the jianghu just like the duel between Kunye and Shen Qiao.

The Göktürks’ advance was gradual but prudent, allying with Northern Zhou through marriage while remaining ambiguous in their dealings with Northern Qi. They assisted Northern Zhou in fighting Northern Qi with one hand while sheltering Northern Qi nobles and officials who sought refuge with the other. One might think they were hesitant and undecided, swaying from side to side, but because of their great strength, neither Northern Zhou nor Qi dared to unduly offend them. And the wolf had never concealed its ambitions.

Now, a new generation of Göktürk experts had arrived in the Central Plains, one after another, almost as if they wanted to complete Hulugu’s old grandiose, unfulfilled desire for absolute dominance. First Kunye had challenged Shen Qiao, crushing Xuandu Mountain underfoot and catapulting himself into the limelight with a single match. And today, another had come to the Su residence and challenged everyone. If not for how Kunye had suffered a loss at Yan Wushi’s hands, the Göktürks’ arrogance would have surely swelled even larger.

As they spoke, they heard Duan Wenyang boom with laughter, and the dazzling sword glares stopped in an instant. From where they’d been,

there came Su Qiao's muffled groan. Before anyone could see how Duan Wenyang made his move, Su Qiao had already fallen off the roof.

"Erlang!" Su Wei hurried forward and pulled him up. "Are you all right?!"

Su Qiao shook his head. His face was wrenched in pain, yet he bore it without making a sound.

Duan Wenyang leapt down from the roof too, his demeanor incredibly casual. No one there held any fondness for him, but they were forced to acknowledge his strength.

"Duan Wenyang, you're taking this too far," said Su Wei angrily. "Do you really think you can walk all over us?"

Duan Wenyang smiled derisively. "That's incorrect, County Duke. Your brother started it. How can you blame me? If you're willing to hand over Yuan Xiong's family, I'll leave immediately and bother you no further."

"You've pushed and pushed, and we've made concession after concession, yet you take us as soft persimmons that you can walk all over! Since that's the case, let me see just how much Hulugu passed down to you." Madam Qin walked out. She was already in her fifties, but perhaps because she'd practiced internal cultivation, her age didn't show. Instead, she carried an air of mature charm and the appearance of a beautiful woman in middle age.

Duan Wenyang said regretfully, "While we're on the topic, I should be calling the Madam Shijie. It's only a pity that the late master expelled you after you escaped the Khaganate with his ring. I've heard that Shizun valued you greatly back then and used to even want you to be his successor. But Madam Qin, you used your beauty to seduce him, then stole his ring and fled. Recalling it all now, don't you feel any guilt?"

"Silence!" The Su brothers were enraged to hear him insult their mother.

But Madam Qin just sneered. "As a junior, the likes of you have no place to speak on matters that are between me and Hulugu! Did the Göktürks suffer such a drought of people that Hulugu could only accept a smack-talker like you as a disciple?"

She said to Su Wei, “Dalang, bring me Erlang’s sword!”

Before Su Wei could make a move, someone said, “Madam Qin need not lower herself to bother with a Göktürk barbarian. You don’t have to trouble yourself so. This man fought a disciple of Chunyang Monastery, so naturally it falls to the members of Chunyang Monastery to finish it.”

The one who spoke was Li Qingyu. Both his expression and tone were flat, without a shred of killing intent.

But it was exactly that even tone that made Duan Wenyang turn serious. He scrutinized Li Qingyu closely for a while, then said, “You must be Li-gongzi, the other member of the Twin Jades of Qingcheng. From what I saw, your shixiong isn’t even a match for one of your fingers, and yet he shares your title. What an injustice that is for you!”

Li Qingyu ignored his provocations and drew his sword, its blade tip pointed downward. His wrist appeared relaxed, yet also slightly raised; his entire body radiated a sense of languid nonchalance. He didn’t seem any more serious than he had a moment ago.

Duan Wenyang’s expression became graver and sterner, and a horsewhip somehow appeared in his hand. It was dark and slender, made of some unknown material that lacked even the slightest hint of shine. Yet at the same time, it seemed completely ordinary.

Puliuru Jian didn’t know what to make of it—he couldn’t resist but turn to Shen Qiao. “Shen-xiong, can you tell what’s special about his whip?”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “I can’t see it very well. What kind of whip is it?”

Puliuru Jian described it to him.

Shen Qiao mulled it over. “If my guess is right, that whip was made from soaking crocodile skins from the Southern Sea into a secret concoction of the Miao people. It’s incredibly tough—even the sharpest of weapons may fail to cut it.”

“Ah,” said Puliuru Jian. “So, it has a spectacular backstory indeed. Looks like Li-gongzi has met his match this time!”

It wasn’t only Puliuru Jian. Everyone else had their necks stretched forward in anticipation too. A fantastic battle was about to take place; it was near impossible to not be excited.

Puliuru Jian had just finished speaking when Li Qingyu moved.

Compared to Su Qiao’s, Li Qingyu’s attack was like night and day.

Su Qiao’s movements were swift—swift and harsh. He used his agility to achieve victory, and both his sword glares and qi were like a vast, inescapable net enveloping his enemy, giving them nowhere to escape and even striking a harsh psychological blow. His style was very effective against weaker opponents, but an expert like Duan Wenyang, whose internal cultivation was sturdy as a steel wall, could simply ignore Su Qiao’s sword qi and smash right through to him.

In contrast, Li Qingyu’s movements were much slower, and his manner composed and unflustered. Others only saw him evenly thrust his sword forward before twirling the tip in a darting feint; the blade point wasn’t even aimed at Duan Wenyang but angled gently at the ground. His movements were almost indolent and languid, like a flower in slow bloom beneath the sun.

However, in Duan Wenyang’s eyes, true qi poured from Li Qingyu’s body and into the blade tip with his twirling feint before surging from his sword toward the ground. Wherever the qi struck, dark tiles were thrown into the air as cracks snaked the ground. The tile fragments, swept up in air currents, shot straight at him!

Before Duan Wenyang could make his next move, Li Qingyu was already in the air. Man and sword became one, and together they melded into a beam of white light that pierced right through the protective true qi around Duan Wenyang as if it were empty air. Blazing sparks leapt in blues and violets, like surging summer lightning!

From slow to fast, calm to urgent, all these changes happened in an instant. If someone’s attention had drifted even slightly, they’d have no time to understand what they were seeing.

Duan Wenyang snapped his whip forward, striking both person and sword with perfect timing!

Two blasts of true qi slammed into each other like an encounter between two kings. They rolled into each other with tremendous force, enough to overturn seas. In the end, either Duan Wenyang's whip would grind Li Qingyu's sword into pieces or Li Qingyu's sword qi would destroy the whip.

The result was completely unexpected, for Duan Wenyang's whip actually missed. Everyone had witnessed Li Qingyu's figure already beneath the whip's silhouette, yet somehow, it had failed to swallow him. Instead, he simply vanished and then suddenly reappeared to Duan Wenyang's left, right, and from behind. Every single "Li Qingyu" was performing the same action—thrusting the blade point evenly forward.

At this moment, Shen Qiao and company heard someone's low shout from the side: "Sword intent! Li Qingyu has managed to achieve sword intent!"

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Chapter 33:
Unexpected Development

THERE WERE FOUR ECHELONS of the sword: sword qi, sword intent, sword heart, and sword spirit.

When laymen saw the sword qi of its wielder running rampant, the qi controlling the sword itself, they'd think the person's swordplay extraordinary. But in truth, this was only the first level when it came to entering the echelons of the sword.

Of course, not everyone could achieve even the first echelon of sword qi. Some people spent their entire lives trying and still failed to pass through that gate, unable to glimpse the way in. And even more people relied on fixed moves to prevail over their enemies. It had only been through Yan Wushi's relentless pressure, forcing Shen Qiao to hover on death's doorstep, that Shen Qiao himself was able to fight his way past certain doom and gain insight into sword intent.

And yet, Li Qingyu had managed to achieve the echelon of sword intent at such a young age. The immensity of his martial aptitude was evident.

But as he'd just broken through to sword intent mere moments ago, he was still unfamiliar with it. Perhaps if he'd broken through back on Xuandu Mountain, he wouldn't have lost to Yu Ai by half a move.

All in all, the moment the words "sword intent" were uttered, everyone looked at Li Qingyu with new eyes.

Yi Pichen was already one of the world's top ten cultivators, and now there was Li Qingyu too. It looked like Chunyang Monastery's rise was already unstoppable.

Duan Wenyang didn't resign himself to defeat. Even though he couldn't immediately determine which of the "afterimages" was the true Li Qingyu, he didn't choose to sort them out. Instead, he chose to snap his whip at the ground and used the resulting force to leap high into the air toward a tree branch overhead. His whip lashed around the branch as he

sprang right off it with the tip of his foot, then swooped down toward Li Qingyu. The dense shroud of black shadows left by his cracking whip enveloped the afterimages entirely!

Before he reached Li Qingyu, his true qi and the mass of whip shadows swallowed everything. Regardless of which afterimage was the true one, Li Qingyu had to forcibly break through the bulwark Duan Wenyang had constructed in order to return to the offensive.

Duan Wenyang's true qi and internal cultivation were exactly the same as the impression he left on others: willful and carefree, but strong and imperious as well. It seemed to be everywhere at once, yet it was also like a precipice of sheer ice, immovably solid, or an antelope suspended high in midair, leaving no tracks to be found. There was nowhere it couldn't enter, and no method that could guard against it.

His true qi ripped the courtyard's leaves from their branches, drawing them into a vortex that swirled around the two fighters, engulfing them entirely and leaving the rest unable to see how the battle progressed.

It was impossible to tell what kind of emotions those two had now, but the observers were incredibly anxious.

The members of Chunyang Monastery knew Li Qingyu wasn't an easy mark, but they still feared that something unforeseen might happen. Especially Su Qiao—he'd fought Duan Wenyang himself, so no one understood Duan Wenyang's power more than him. Whether his shidi could win this battle or not was still uncertain.

If Duan Wenyang defeated Li Qingyu, it was unlikely that anyone else present could match him. If that happened, then whether or not Duan Wenyang could take away Su Wei's cousin and her husband wasn't the main problem—once the news got out, the Göktürks' prestige would grow further, and the Central Plains' morale would diminish. This, too, was probably why Duan Wenyang had chosen to launch an attack today.

Just as Su Wei's thoughts were spiraling, the leaves whirling around the two combatants froze, then drifted to the ground one after another.

The two of them stood face-to-face. Li Qingyu was still where he had been, but the sword that had been in his hand lay a short distance away, while Duan Wenyang's whip was still firmly grasped in his hand.

There was nothing strange in their complexions, and no visible hint of injuries on either. Li Qingyu's expression was blank; Duan Wenyang looked the same as before.

Seeing this, the crowd was a bit confused.

Then Duan Wenyang let out a boisterous laugh and spoke first. "Li-gongzi's fame is indeed well deserved, to achieve the echelon of 'sword intent' at such a young age. Your future achievements will surely be boundless. This Duan willingly admits defeat!"

Li Qingyu said slowly, "My skill is inferior. There's nothing I can say."

Hearing this, everyone was stunned. They looked at Duan Wenyang, then looked back at Li Qingyu.

One admitted defeat, while the other said his skill was inferior. Exactly who had won, and who had lost?

Duan Wenyang laughed. "I came here for a family, and never thought I'd get the chance to spar with the most prestigious rising star of the day. This trip wasn't a waste!"

Xie Xiang broke in. "If Duan-xiong still wishes to continue, the Linchuan Academy is willing to keep you occupied as well."

Duan Wenyang looked all around him, then clasped his hands behind his back. "And what can Linchuan Academy do?" he said arrogantly. "You can't defeat me—let Ruyan Kehui himself come instead. I heard that many great heroes have gathered here: Linchuan Academy, Chunyang Monastery, the Liuhe Guild, all illustrious martial sects and organizations of the Central Plains. Full of respect and admiration, I paid you an official visit, but it seems your fame is ill-deserved, and the rumors full of exaggeration. Of everyone here today, only Li-gongzi is worthy of being my opponent. The rest are merely mediocre."

He then paused before continuing, "Ah, I almost forgot. There's also Sect Leader Shen. Your prowess might have been a little better than theirs, but that was only before you lost to my shidi. The current Shen Qiao is just a toothless tiger. You people of the Central Plains had a saying…something like 'even dogs can push around a tiger in the plains.' You can't return to Xuandu Mountain with the state you're in, and you're forced to rely on Sect

Leader Yan’s protection. You’re below even a stray dog! If I were you, I’d have killed myself out of shame long ago. How could I still have the face to live in this world?”

Although there was a smile on his face, his expression as he looked at Shen Qiao was incomparably cold and indifferent.

It was very obvious that, in his eyes, Shen Qiao was no longer a potential opponent but some insignificant passerby, or even trash.

Puliuru Jian felt that, if he had been the one to suffer this kind of public humiliation, he couldn’t have endured it. But Shen Qiao only stood there, meek and docile, head and lashes lowered. It was as if he’d heard nothing, or like he’d fallen asleep standing up. While this level of forbearance and restraint drew admiration, it also elicited contempt.

Xie Xiang could remain indifferent to the mocking Duan Wenyang directed at Shen Qiao, but not to him all but calling Linchuan Academy worthless. He couldn’t pretend that he hadn’t heard how Duan Wenyang had spoken as if only Chunyang Monastery was worthy enough to be his opponent, and everyone else was completely beneath him. He gave a derisive laugh, about to erupt.

“Duan Wenyang,” said Su Wei. “You used our mother’s birthday banquet as your personal training ground. You’ve made more than enough mess already. Since you came as a representative of the empress, I must report what happened today to His Majesty so that he may deal with you. Now I ask you to leave this place immediately!”

Duan Wenyang laughed. “I received Li-gongzi’s advice with his sword intent today, so I’m satisfied. I was already planning to leave anyway, with or without the Duke of Meiyang County’s orders. I look forward to meeting you again!”

Saying this, he turned right around to leave, and Xie Xiang couldn’t take it any longer. “Halt! Linchuan Academy’s Xie Xiang asks to receive Duan-xiong’s guidance!”

Before he’d even finished speaking, his sword had left its sheath. His body transformed into a sweeping arc as he flew toward Duan Wenyang.

But it seemed Duan Wenyang had predicted this move. Without even turning his head, he propelled himself upward with a tap of his foot and alit

on the roof. Then he vanished completely, leaving only a long string of laughter behind him. “I understand that Xie-langjun wishes to use me to achieve fame, but please excuse me for not wanting to keep you company,” he said. “Let’s leave it until after you achieve sword intent too, ha ha!”

Without a target, Xie Xiang could only sheathe his sword and ground himself once more, glaring hatefully in the direction where Duan Wenyang had vanished.

From the sidelines, a person called out in alarm, “Li-gongzi, are you all right?!”

Everyone hastily turned their heads toward the sound of that voice. Li Qingyu had pulled out a handkerchief, already stained with a mouthful of bloody foam. He shook his head and said, “I’m fine. I suffered some minor internal injuries. A couple days of recuperation will be enough.”

Only then did everyone else understand what he’d meant by “my skill was inferior” just then. But if even someone like Li Qingyu, who’d achieved sword intent, wasn’t his match, then exactly how terrifying was Duan Wenyang’s martial prowess? Could he be the second coming of Hulugu?

With this on their minds, they looked helplessly at each other with horror.

Xie Xiang’s heart fell too.

He’d thought himself fairly talented—the opponents he encountered while traveling the jianghu for years had given him an illusion, one that told him that even if he couldn’t make the top ten just yet, he wasn’t far. But all of a sudden these experts had popped up, one after the other. First there was Li Qingyu, who’d already achieved “sword intent,” then there was Duan Wenyang, who was even stronger than Li Qingyu. Once, Xie Xiang had thought himself capable of anything in the jianghu, that he could conquer even its tumultuous tides. Yet in that very jianghu, the young replaced the old, and every mountain loomed higher than the previous.

While Xie Xiang grew dispirited, Li Qingyu approached Shen Qiao. “Sect Leader Shen.”

“This Shen is no longer the sect leader,” said Shen Qiao. “Li-gongzi need not address me as such.”

Li Qingyu ignored him and continued. “I’ve already achieved the echelon of sword intent, yet I’m still a bit inferior to Duan Wenyang. Does that mean his shidi Kunye is even stronger than him?”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “Though Kunye’s martial prowess is notable, he’s not on Duan Wenyang’s level.”

“Qi Fengge was the world’s number one, and I greatly admired him for his martial prowess and magnificence,” said Li Qingyu. “And yet Sect Leader Shen, his direct successor, couldn’t even defeat Kunye.”

Shen Qiao was silent.

Li Qingyu released a quiet sigh. “‘When you were born, I was not. When I was born, you were already old.’ I regret that I wasn’t able to witness the glory of Qi Fengge’s martial arts firsthand, and when I still believed that Xuandu Mountain had worthy successors. It’s a pity, such a pity!”

Though his expression was as mild as before, when he spoke of “pity,” one could hear resoundingly sincere disappointment in his voice.

This was a man who’d completely dedicated himself to martial arts. He would never look down on the untalented or on those who failed to study beneath a good master. But as Li Qingyu saw it, Shen Qiao had both innate talent and a perfect environment far beyond others, and yet he’d still come to this. Not only did he look down on Shen Qiao, he also bore against him a faint anger, born of disenchantment.

First, he’d taken Duan Wenyang’s contempt, and now it was Li Qingyu’s lamentations, not to mention the dubious stares of the crowd around them. Anyone with pride would be wearing an ugly expression by now, if they hadn’t flown into a rage instead. They’d lack the face to stick around.

But Shen Qiao could endure what others could not. Or perhaps he wasn’t enduring at all. He remained as stolid and unyielding as ever, his expression unchanged, and he even nodded his head in agreement with Li Qingyu. “My master was indeed extraordinarily magnificent—few people could compare. It’s a pity Li-gongzi wasn’t able to meet his esteemed self at least once. Li-gongzi’s peerless talent would doubtless have received my master’s praise.”

In spite of everything, he could say such a thing. Even Puliuru Jian could only admire Shen Qiao's self-restraint and the way he brushed aside the criticism leveled at him.

It seemed that Li Qingyu didn't expect such a reaction from Shen Qiao either. "You were a great man, so why must you dance with that demon and debase yourself?"

By "demon," he of course meant Yan Wushi.

Shen Qiao had been a proper, upright leader of a Daoist sect, yet he'd fallen so far that he'd involved himself with a "demon" like Yan Wushi. Of course it looked like debasement to an outsider.

But although the jianghu's groups and organizations saw Yan Wushi as the leader of a demonic sect, he was also the Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince, personally appointed by the emperor himself. Puliuru Jian's brow wrinkled, and before Shen Qiao had said anything, he spoke up first.

"Li-gongzi has incredible skill indeed, and Jian admires you greatly. However, the greater one's talents are, the more modest and open-minded one should be. Shen-langjun is in poor health and he's never offended you, so why must this distinguished master act so aggressively? As someone from a prestigious sect, do you not find such conduct dishonorable?"

Li Qingyu shot Puliuru Jian a glance and said nothing. He didn't make to stay either and instead turned away to leave.

Su Wei stopped him—first he bowed, then said in a loud voice, "Today's banquet was ruined due to an uninvited guest, and this was our Su family's fault. I thank everyone for your courage in actively supporting and defending us. My brother is injured, so we must end the banquet prematurely. Wei apologizes to everyone for this and promises that we'll resume another day. He asks for your forgiveness."

No one could have predicted what happened that day. Naturally, no one blamed the hosts; instead, they offered their consolations, one after another. Some of the nobles who were close family friends even discussed with him how to submit a memorial to the emperor for the impending complaint.

Some guests took their leave, trickling out while one of Madam Qin's maids led Li Qingyu to the back of the residence for treatment and rest.

Puliuru Jian said to Shen Qiao, “Shen-xiong, let’s go as well.”

Shen Qiao nodded, but he hadn’t yet gotten a word out when something else ensued.

“As I was leaving just now, something occurred to me. Since you’re unwilling to hand over Yuan Xiong and his wife, then I’ll invite over the Madam as a guest. Let me see whom you value more: your mother or your cousin!”

It was a voice traveling in from afar, its sound bright and incomparably clear, as if he were speaking right next to each listener’s ear. Such a high level of “Sound Displacement” was even more difficult to pull off than the “Sound Transmission” technique.

Su Wei and Su Qiao’s faces were distorted by fear. Su Wei was a scholar through and through, lacking even enough strength to truss a chicken, while Su Qiao had just suffered a harsh loss to Duan Wenyang. His right hand was still completely immobilized, but he couldn’t spare a thought for it, and he leapt, throwing himself to where his mother was.

But before he could even get close, he was suddenly tossed in the opposite direction, landing heavily on the ground. The others couldn’t even see how he’d been injured.

No one had expected Duan Wenyang to return so soon after he’d left.

But of course, he’d never promised to drop his request for Yuan Xiong and his wife. He must have planned this long in advance and not retreated too far away in the first place.

At this kind of critical moment it would be mere empty, useless talk to condemn him for resorting to such underhanded and shameless tactics. Regardless of whether it was the jianghu or the court, or even the shifting powers of the world, it was dog-eat-dog, might makes right. Whoever punched the hardest got the final say.

So the moment Su Qiao was sent flying, Li Qingyu, Dou Yanshan, and Xie Xiang took action as one, all trying to stop Duan Wenyang.

These men were the cream of the crop in the jianghu at present. If there was a gap between them and the top ten, it was a small one. Li Qingyu, for example, was likely already qualified to enter the top ten ranks

—even if he had been slightly inferior to Duan Wenyang during their duel just moments ago. But if all three of them attacked as a group, there was no reason they should fail.

But they'd miscalculated.

Duan Wenyang didn't go for Madam Qin. Instead, he switched targets halfway and went straight for Su Wei!

Madam Qin had been a disciple under Hulugu in her youth. Even if she hadn't fought for many years, her martial skills were likely quite sound. But Su Wei was different—the Duke of Meiyang County was naught but a scholar, and he didn't know a lick of martial arts. Duan Wenyang's movements were direct and agile, totally unhesitating. He must have been feinting earlier; this was his plan all along.

The group was already half a step behind, and now, with a flap of his sleeve, Duan Wenyang sent out a palm strike that impeded them for another moment. By the time they were ready to attack again, Duan Wenyang's fingers were already touching Su Wei's neck. Even if they'd been godly immortals, there was no way they could rescue him in time.

Su Qiao cried out helplessly in alarm, "Xiongzhang!"

Madam Qin's complexion twisted as she snarled, "Don't touch my son!"

Then, suddenly, Duan Wenyang made a sound of surprise.

It wasn't because of Su Qiao's and Madam Qin's shouts, and it certainly wasn't because Li Qingyu and the others had somehow made it to him in time.

A bamboo cane had come out of nowhere, cutting him off squarely from the front.

Duan Wenyang instinctively reached out to push it aside, but somehow the cane slipped from his grasp time and again, as impossible to catch as a mudfish and leaving him no room to apply proper force. True qi spread from the cane's movements in overlapping ripples, and though it wasn't crushing, it was powerfully persistent. Duan Wenyang was forced to temporarily abandon Su Wei and devote his attention to this new, unexpected opponent.

When he finally got a good look at who his opponent was, his shock showed starkly on his face, about to brim over.

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Chapter 34:
Shen Qiao Strikes, II

SHEN QIAO'S EYES were still gently closed, his face tranquil like placid waters. To an observer, it would seem that the bamboo cane in his hand moved completely arbitrarily, hitting wherever it wished with no pattern to speak of.

But it was exactly the disorder in these attacks that made Duan Wenyang wary. With his expression even graver than when he'd faced Li Qingyu, he exchanged a hundred blows with Shen Qiao in an instant. They fought from the ground to the rooftops, then from the rooftops to the trees, light and shadow dancing across their figures as they flitted about, at times restrained and at other times brutal. The speed at which they struck and parried was astounding—anyone whose martial arts were even slightly lacking were unable to discern their moves.

And so far, Shen Qiao showed no signs of falling behind.

Now that Duan Wenyang was unable to pay attention to them, the Su family's servants hastily came up and surrounded Su Wei to protect him. Su Qiao bid them take his mother and brother back into the house, while he himself remained standing outside, despite the pain.

The more everyone watched, the more astonished they became, and the most astonished was none other than Duan Wenyang.

When Shen Qiao had failed to react to Duan Wenyang and Li Qingyu's taunts, it came as no surprise to anyone. For Duan Wenyang wasn't the only one who thought that Shen Qiao's current state meant he was already half-ruined. Fame could be rebuilt, but recovering his martial arts would be very difficult, and without it, he had no place in the jianghu. If he was forced to rely on others for protection, then no matter how powerful that protector was, Shen Qiao was no better than trash in the eyes of Duan Wenyang and the rest. Anyone had the right to look down on him.

And yet it was this "trash" who accomplished what almost everybody else there had failed to do—he'd not only stopped Duan Wenyang, he even

fought him to a draw.

Just then, many of those watching couldn't help but think: in the end, the Sect Leader of Xuandu Mountain was the Sect Leader of Xuandu Mountain. The title of "World's Number One Daoist Sect" was mostly flattery, but Shen Qiao hadn't been chosen as Qi Fengge's successor without reason.

That being said, if he was on par with Duan Wenyang, how had he lost that duel to Kunye and ended up in such a state? Was there some hidden story within?

As chaotic thoughts flashed through everyone's minds, they stared unswervingly at the duel before them, afraid to miss even a single second. The fight was just as marvelous as the match with Li Qingyu just before.

However, inside the circle of battle, things weren't as effortless for Shen Qiao as the spectators believed.

In truth, Duan Wenyang was indeed very strong, and his martial abilities were definitely above Kunye's. Both were irrefutable.

There were a couple reasons that Shen Qiao had been able to hold on for so long. First, he still had half of his martial power as a base. Second, Duan Wenyang had been injured during his fight with Li Qingyu. And third, Xuandu Mountain's martial arts complemented the Eight Trigrams, Ziwei Doushu, and even various forms of astrology. The result was exquisite and unpredictable. Because he'd never encountered it before, Duan Wenyang lost the initiative and was swept along.

The fight was splendid to watch. Duan Wenyang sent out lash after lash with his whip, the strikes as devastating and unstoppable as lightning. Unyielding, domineering true qi hammered at Shen Qiao with every curving slash of the whip, weighing him down. The pressure on Shen Qiao grew and grew. He was like a piece of fragile porcelain: beautiful, yet on the verge of breaking, and unable to withstand another blow.

A sharp crack sounded. The bamboo cane had snapped in half. Li Qingyu immediately tossed the Qiushui sword he held to Shen Qiao. "Catch!"

Using only his ears to discern its direction, Shen Qiao caught it firmly in hand without even turning his head. Sword qi swung downward,

slicing into the wall of Duan Wenyang's whip's afterimages with perfect accuracy.

Like a mountain-felling earthquake, or the rapids of a thousand ravines engulfing the dikes, the sword qi screamed forth, completely unstoppable.

Duan Wenyang's expression flickered as he was forced to relent and retreat. The whip's multitude of afterimages vanished and were replaced by a single arc of white light.

The white light wasn't sword qi because it lacked both form and substance. It also didn't feel like true qi—it fluttered and flowed, the body as limber as a cloth ribbon. But it also rushed after Duan Wenyang like a shadow, as if it had a mind of its own. It chased him relentlessly, unwilling to let up for a single second.

"What is that? Is that also sword qi?" Zhan Ziqian asked in astonishment.

"No, it's sword intent." The one who answered was his shidi, Xie Xiang.

"Then why does it look different from what Li Qingyu used earlier?"

"Li Qingyu's sword intent was formless, but this one has form."

"The formless surpasses the formed," Zhan Ziqian said. "So, Li Qingyu is a level above him?"

"A sword's intentions are formless by nature," said Xie Xiang. "So how can the formless surpass the formed here? If he's capable of creating a sword intent with form, that means he's already grasped the essence of the sword and is close to the echelon of sword heart!"

Understanding dawned on Zhan Ziqian, and his good opinion of Shen Qiao transformed into fervent admiration.

Duan Wenyang retreated dozens of steps in a single go, but the white sword intent lost not a hint of its edge, despite its soft and pliable appearance. It gave relentless chase, determined to capture him.

The sword intent and the whip's fall met. And though the whip was made of the skin of Southern Sea crocodiles, cured with dozens of herbs, the sword intent sliced a section of it clean off!

Duan Wenyang's expression shifted. From his palm, he sent a forceful blast toward the sword intent. Like sky and water meeting where the mists churned about the cliffs, the waterfalls cascading into the river like bands of silk, that boundless white shattered into chaos, and all was thrown into confusion!

An enormous, tangible wave rolled in all directions. Everyone reeled back in alarm at the sight of it, and only after they'd taken a great many steps did they realize that the deluge had not been a true wave but rather residual sword intent in the shape of one.

The crowd returned to their senses, but a chilly sensation of moisture lingered on their skin, a testimony to the power of the sword intent.

Zhan Ziqian found it fascinating and couldn't resist wiping at his face. Of course, nothing came away on his hand, but Xie Xiang said, "That's because he hasn't completely realized a fully formed sword intent yet. If it had been perfected, there's no guarantee us onlookers would have come away unscathed."

Zhan Ziqian always admired his shidi's insight. Right away, he asked, "It seems his internal cultivation and true qi aren't in complete harmony with his sword intent. Why is that?"

Xie Xiang made a sound of agreement, his gaze still on the battle. "He's probably suffering from an old injury, so his internal cultivation is greatly diminished. Even if he's achieved sword intent, he can't wield to its fullest extent. I fear he won't last much longer."

Zhan Ziqian quickly looked back toward Shen Qiao. He had a good opinion of Shen Qiao, so he didn't want him to lose. But within the overlapping afterimages of sword intent and whip, it was very difficult to discern how the combatants were holding up.

Duan Wenyang was getting tired. He'd lost part of his whip, and he'd been injured during his earlier duel with Li Qingyu. He'd long ago begun to regret underestimating Shen Qiao. Though he was a little lacking in terms of internal energy, his sword intent was overwhelmingly powerful. No matter how excellent Duan Wenyang's internal cultivation was, he couldn't keep expending his qi without pause. When he saw Shen Qiao's sword intent blaze all the brighter, heralding another powerful attack, he immediately lost all desire to carry on fighting. He withdrew and sped

away, all while laughing, “Sect Leader Shen’s reputation is well deserved! I fear I don’t have the time today—I shall seek your guidance another time. Farewell!”

No one could stop him from leaving. Although he’d been born in the Khaganate, his qinggong was exceptional, and his movements unfamiliar and perplexing. No one present could identify the source of his technique.

Shen Qiao didn’t give chase.

He was the only person who had fought both Kunye and Duan Wenyang.

Kunye was indeed a skilled fighter, but he would have lost their duel at Banbu Peak if Shen Qiao hadn’t fallen for that poisoning scheme.

But Duan Wenyang was different. Shen Qiao might have lost most of his martial arts, but his insight was still intact, and he was astonished by how frightening an opponent Duan Wenyang was. Though he’d appeared to have the upper hand during their duel, he hadn’t been able to probe the depths of Duan Wenyang’s abilities. Shen Qiao had been flagging like an arrow nearing the end of its flight, and if they’d carried on fighting, he would have certainly lost. Yet, at that very moment, Duan Wenyang had chosen to retreat.

As he stood in place, catching his breath, Shen Qiao realized that manifesting his formed sword intent had cost him more than half of his true qi. His body was terribly weak, and it was arduous even to walk normally. He could do nothing but smile bitterly to himself.

Li Qingyu walked up to him. “Sect Leader Shen.”

Shen Qiao took the opportunity to offer Qiushui back to him. “Thank you, Li-gongzi, for lending me your sword. It’s an excellent blade, but unfortunately, this Shen disgraced it with his inadequacy.”

Li Qingyu took the proffered sword. “I misspoke just now—don’t take it to heart.”

Speaking humbly was obviously something rare for him; even his apology came out a little cold and stiff.

Shen Qiao smiled. “You’re being too courteous, Li-gongzi. If you hadn’t lent me the sword just then, I fear I’d be lying dead in the courtyard

now.”

As his eyes became capable of vaguely making out the world around him, he’d gradually developed the habit of squinting at people and objects. And so, although his eyes were as spiritless as before, when beneath the sun they seemed to take on a brimming shine. Those who saw him this way couldn’t help but lament.

Li Qingyu stared at him for a moment. “If you have nowhere to go,” he said suddenly, “Chunyang Monastery can provide you with a place to live. You need not lower yourself to depend on others, and especially not on people you dislike.”

Nearby, Su Qiao was astonished to overhear this offer. Everyone in Chunyang Monastery knew of his shidi’s cold and steely disposition and that he cared only for martial arts. Perhaps he felt a bit of warmth toward his master and fellow disciples, but that was all. Su Qiao himself had never heard of Li Qingyu softening his words for anyone, let alone inviting someone to stay at Chuyang Monastery. Yet here he was, treating a complete stranger like Shen Qiao with such regard.

Shen Qiao also seemed somewhat surprised. He froze for a second, then smiled in answer. “Thank you for your kindness, Li-gongzi.”

He’d thanked him but hadn’t specified whether it was necessary—that meant a refusal.

They were just two strangers who’d met by chance; they had little relationship with each other. Shen Qiao didn’t want his affairs to cause Chunyang Monastery trouble.

Li Qingyu nodded and said no more. Taking his sword, he left.

Though no one had said so aloud, in their hearts they’d all looked down on this downtrodden former sect leader. But now, after Shen Qiao and Duan Wenyang’s duel, such thoughts had been banished like smoke.

Yes, Shen Qiao had the advantage of fighting the second round. But if he hadn’t taken action, who else could have stopped Duan Wenyang?

And who could claim that they would force Duan Wenyang to withdraw?

Madam Qin came over, supported by her maid. She bowed deeply to Shen Qiao, as did Su Wei and Su Qiao. “Thank you, Sect Leader Shen,” she said, “for saving my son in time. Please accept this old woman’s respects!”

Shen Qiao hurried to stop her. “The Madam need not be so courteous. Duan Wenyang returned and took the Duke of Meiyang County hostage—that was most dishonorable of him. As a guest in your residence, of course it’s my duty to lend my support!”

“Regardless, from this day onward, you are the Su family’s great benefactor,” said Madam Qin. “Our doors will always be open to you—if Shen-xiansheng has any requests, our Su family will do its absolute best to fulfill them.”

The Su family might not have been able to do very much, but even so, Madam Qin’s sincere gratitude shone clearly in her fervent promise.

The birthday banquet had been forced to come to an end with Duan Wenyang’s interference. Everyone had arrived with their spirits high and now left with them low. Puliuru Jian walked out of the manor with Shen Qiao and invited him to visit his home at a later date. Then he said his farewells and went on his way.

Shen Qiao was about to get into the carriage, but Zhan Ziqian called after him, “Please wait, Shen-langjun!” He bowed with clasped hands, then asked, “I wanted to speak to you earlier but couldn’t find the chance. Please grant me one request!”

“What’s the matter, is it something serious?” asked Shen Qiao curiously.

Zhan Ziqian smiled. “I want to ask if you’ll let me paint you.”

“Paint me?” asked Shen Qiao.

“Exactly,” said Zhan Ziqian. “I’ve always loved painting, and my favorite subjects are gods and immortals. But though this world has all manner of people in it, where would one find a real god or an immortal? But then I saw Shen-langjun—out of everyone, you’re the closest to my heart’s ideal. That’s why I wanted to ask if you’ll be my model.”

Shen Qiao had heard all kinds of strange requests, but this was the first time someone asked to paint him. For a moment, he didn’t know how

to react or reply.

Before Zhan Ziqian could try to convince him further, Xie Xiang walked over. “Please don’t be offended, Shen-langjun. My shixiong is obsessed with painting, so this is normal!”

He cupped his hands and then grabbed Zhan Ziqian’s arm, making to leave.

Zhan Ziqian yelped a few times, but he couldn’t overpower Xie Xiang. He could only keep calling out to Shen Qiao, “Shen-langjun, please don’t rush to leave the capital! This Zhan will definitely find a day to come visit!”

Shen Qiao shook his head and burst out laughing, then turned back and stepped into the carriage. He fished out a handkerchief and coughed a mouthful of blood into it, his expression quickly turning heavy with fatigue.

The injuries his sword intent had inflicted on Duan Wenyang would probably take half a month to heal, but he hadn’t walked away unscathed either. His vitality and qi were damaged—he’d only been forcing himself to look unaffected.

Xie Xiang must have realized, and so he’d stopped Zhan Ziqian from detaining him any longer.

Yan Wushi always loved luxury, and his subordinates always catered to his tastes, so the inside of the carriage was comfortable and lavishly decorated. Shen Qiao asked the coachman to return to the Junior Preceptor’s residence. Then, no longer needing to conceal his condition, he leaned against the carriage wall. His expression was steeped with exhaustion, his eyebrows slightly furrowed. Unknowingly, he drifted off.

His fatigue was extreme, so he fell into a deep sleep, completely dead to the world. When he woke, he found the wheels of the carriage beneath him still clattering away as they rolled, and his heart sank a little.

He lifted the carriage curtain and looked out. Faintly, he could see that they were already outside the city and driving through the outskirts. In short, this was definitely not the way back to the Junior Preceptor’s residence.

“Lao-Wei, is that you?”

No one answered, but the carriage slowed before coming to a complete stop.

The driver looked back. Though the clothes were still Lao-Wei's, the face was not: it was fair and pretty, the cheeks dimpled even when no smile graced them.

Even though he couldn't see the driver well, the moment they spoke, Shen Qiao knew who they were.

"Say, I'm not the only one who thinks so, but the Su residence's security is far too lax. I simply put on Lao-Wei's clothes, donned a hat, and as long as I mimicked his voice a little, they didn't suspect a thing. There wasn't even any need to change my face. Anyone could have gone in and out of a place like that. You helped them drive Duan Wenyang off, but you won't be able to do it a second time."

"Where's Lao-Wei?" asked Shen Qiao.

Bai Rong pouted. "Why is Sect Leader Shen only concerned about some old man when there's this great beauty right before you? Where's your concern for me? Dead, dead! Of course I killed him!"

Shen Qiao smiled. "I misspoke—that question was unnecessary. With your cleverness, you wouldn't risk provoking Yan Wushi over a mere coachman."

Bai Rong giggled. "When I can kidnap the likes of you, what's a coachman? Do you mean you're afraid I won't tell you the truth? Fine, fine, telling you is of no consequence. Indeed, I have no interest in killing a nobody like that. I knocked him out and left him in the Su family's stable. Whether he lives or dies is his business—not my problem if he gets trampled! But still, Yan Wushi doesn't treat you well at all. He knows of your frail health, of how you'll cough up blood and pass out at the drop of a hat. Yet still he only sent a coachman with you? Did he see this coming?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "My relationship with Yan Wushi isn't what you think it is. You need not keep trying to provoke me. So, why has little Bai-niangzi brought me all the way out here?"

Suddenly, Bai Rong pressed forward until her warm, scented breaths were only inches away from him. With a slight frown, Shen Qiao involuntarily leaned back, but she reached for him. As his bamboo cane had

snapped in Su residence, he had to block her with his bare hands. In an instant, they'd exchanged dozens of blows.

Bai Rong's strikes came at incredible speed, her hands shifting through countless gestures like a flower transforming through life—a bud blossoming in full before wilting, all in the span of one breath. Glory and decline, a lifetime in an instant.

However, her peerlessly exquisite "Blue Lotus Seals" were all blocked by Shen Qiao, as if he'd already anticipated her every move. Every time, he was just a little faster than Bai Rong, never early nor late.

Bai Rong hadn't witnessed Shen Qiao's fight with Duan Wenyang; her impression of him was frozen at the feeble, sickly state he'd been in back in Huai Province. When she saw him block every single one of the "Blue Lotus Seals" she was so proud of, she was utterly thunderstruck.

"When I heard that you killed my shixiong, I didn't quite believe it," she said. "But now it seems it must be true. Have you recovered your martial arts?"

As she finished asking, Bai Rong dodged a blast from Shen Qiao's palm, then circled behind him and struck his acupoint. Then, without warning, she wrapped her arms around him from behind and stretched forward to peer at his face. "To be born with such good looks even though you're a Daoist priest! You'll drive us demonic practitioners out of business!"

Saying this, she took the liberty of kissing Shen Qiao on the tip of his nose.

Things were moving too fast. With Shen Qiao's vitality so greatly damaged, just meeting her strikes had been hard for him. He hadn't expected this tactic from her at all and was completely flustered, his face overcome by astonishment.

Bai Rong giggled. "I've wanted to do that from the first day I saw you! Today I've finally fulfilled my wish!"

His acupoint was sealed, so he couldn't move. Shen Qiao gave up all meaningless struggle. "What do you want?" he asked.

"You killed Huo Xijing and still ask me what I want?" said Bai Rong. "That guy, Huo Xijing, he was always fawning over Shizun, and Shizun really liked him. Now that he's dead, Shizun's really upset, so he told me to bring you back for him to deal with!"

The more she looked at him, the more she found Shen Qiao quite becoming. Man or woman, everyone in Hehuan Sect was beautiful, but their cultivation of charm techniques together with their lack of scruples meant their beauty could never give off that impression of otherworldly aloofness.

If Hehuan Sect were the succubi immersed in worldly desires, frolicking around indulging in the flesh, then Shen Qiao was a godly statue inside a temple, standing high above all else, devoid of both joy and sorrow.

But the more heretical someone was, the more they'd want to defile that statue.

"But now I feel a little reluctant!" Bai Rong said gleefully. "With your good looks, you'll definitely be tortured if you fall into my shizun's hands. Even if you don't die, you'll come close. I don't completely remember the contents of the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s Volume of Deluded Thought from our last encounter. If you're willing to recite it for me again so that we can compare notes, I'll let you go! I'll go back and tell Shizun that I can't beat Sect Leader Yan. How about it?"

"Xuandu Mountain has the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s Volume of Lost Soul. Since you know I'm Shen Qiao, why not ask me to recite that one for you too?"

Bai Rong laughed. “Do you take me for a fool? I’ve never heard this Volume of Lost Soul. I wouldn’t be able to tell even if you scrambled the passages or recited any old nonsense. But I remember most of the Volume of Deluded Thought, just not all of it. If you switched things around on me, at least I’ll know.”

“And what if I refuse to cooperate?” asked Shen Qiao.

“Then this one will just have to hand you over to Shizun,” Bai Rong said sweetly. “Surely, you’ve heard about my shizun Sang Jingxing? He’s many times crueler than my shixiong Huo Xijing. Gender makes no difference to him, and he loves parasitic cultivation[2] the most. He also enjoys tormenting people in bed until they’re at death’s door. I dare not imagine what would happen to a beauty like you, should you fall into his grasp!”

Shen Qiao sighed. “You all take me for a fallen tiger in the plains. Someone you can do anything to, as if I’m already caught and my fate is sealed. Do you think I’d just let things go in a situation like this? Even if I won’t go around slaughtering people, that doesn’t mean I’ll allow myself to be slaughtered!”

Bai Rong startled, but before she could figure out what Shen Qiao meant by that, he’d already moved. His long, slender index finger extended toward her!

“Spring Waters finger technique? Why do you know the Spring Waters finger technique?!”

Her face filled with terror, Bai Rong leapt back.

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Chapter 35:
Contention

ONE TRULY COULDN'T FAULT Bai Rong for overreacting. The demonic sects' fear of Yan Wushi ran incredibly deep.

Before he'd entered secluded cultivation, Yan Wushi had taken on all three demonic sects by himself. By his hand, Fajing Sect had been half annihilated, and Hehuan Sect suffered devastating losses too—just a little more, and the unification he sought would have been complete. If it hadn't been for his defeat by Cui Youwang, which forced him to recuperate in seclusion, who knew how the three sects would look.

Even though his efforts had fallen short, the fear of Yan Wushi's name was etched deeply in the bones of all demonic cultivators.

Since she was fairly young, Bai Rong hadn't been strong enough to face him in combat back then. But not long ago, her master had ordered her to assassinate Yan Wushi's eldest disciple, Bian Yanmei, and in a stroke of misfortune, she encountered Yan Wushi himself. It'd taken everything she had to escape with her life, an experience which granted her a deeper appreciation for the title "Demon Lord."

If Shen Qiao hadn't been alone today, she never would have risked showing herself.

But when she saw Shen Qiao use the Spring Waters finger technique, the terror from her recent brush with death reared its head once again.

Bai Rong dared not meet the approaching finger directly. Instead, she retreated backward with a flash. She was unwilling to let the prey she'd bagged fly away, though. Like a river loach, she plastered herself to the wall and slid along it, angling to grab Shen Qiao from behind.

But Shen Qiao almost seemed to have eyes on the back of his head—his pointer finger suddenly became a palm strike. His strike was soft and fluttering and absent any force, yet the internal energy contained within it was so relentless and intense that Bai Rong dared not take it lightly.

By now, she realized that she'd massively underestimated him. When she'd witnessed Shen Qiao coughing up blood inside the carriage just a short while before, she'd thought him almost spent. To think he still had so much left in him!

Bai Rong's palms were lovely and tender, pretty and delicate, and the sight of them should have been enough to soften the heart of any man, make them reluctant to attack. But Shen Qiao was an exception—because he couldn't see, appearance-based charm techniques had no effect on him.

Their palms met, the touch whisper-silent and featherlight. It was more akin to a maiden's coquettish appeal to her beloved than an exchange of attacks.

Bai Rong felt a heavy blow slam into her chest—her eyes widened in disbelief. Gritting her teeth, she struck at the carriage with her other hand. The compartment immediately exploded—the walls splintered, and the horse spooked. It galloped forward madly as Shen Qiao leapt into the air, then landed on its back, giving the reins a harsh yank. The crazed horse snorted but was forced to slow.

From behind him came a low sigh. "Shen-lang is so gentle and sentimental, unwilling to harm even a horse. I'm a little jealous of Sect Leader Yan!"

Reluctant to give up, and seeing that Shen Qiao was distracted dealing with the horse, Bai Rong launched herself at him. Her words overflowed with affection, but they didn't blunt the brutality of her attacks in the slightest. She struck at Shen Qiao's back—even if she crippled him, she thought, it'd be no matter. After all, as long as he drew breath and could speak, he could still recite the Volume of Deluded Thought for her!

Shen Qiao heaved a sigh too, but he didn't turn around. Instead, he slid down so that he was against the horse's side. He held the reins with one hand and pressed the horse down with the other, forcing it to kneel on the ground so that it wouldn't end up hurt in the crossfire. Once it was down, he pushed off the ground with a tap of his foot and sent himself flying straight at Bai Rong.

Bai Rong had already suffered beneath his hands, so she dared not face him head-on again. She immediately withdrew her palm and vanished into the woods, leaving behind only a string of giggles. "Shen-lang is

willing to protect even a horse, yet he's so cruel to me! I'll come back to play with you another day!"

Once he'd made sure she was truly gone, Shen Qiao found he lacked the strength to stay upright. Supporting himself with the horse, he doubled over. His legs gave out, and he dropped to his knees on the ground.

Kneeling there, the horse had finally calmed down. It neighed twice and tilted its head at Shen Qiao, looking at him with bright, confused eyes.

Shen Qiao patted it gently. "I'm sorry for dragging you into this…"

His words trailed off as blood surged up his throat—he couldn't suppress it. Instinctually, he slapped a hand over his mouth, but the blood trickled out between his fingers.

Shen Qiao gave up holding it in. His hand went slack, and the blood spilled out. When it was done, he raised his sleeve to wipe at the bloodstains around his mouth.

Releasing another breath, a spate of dizziness came over him. His ears rang, and he staggered, light-headed. All he wanted was to collapse then and there and close his eyes, to not worry about anything ever again.

Such a state wasn't foreign to him—feebleness had overcome him often ever since he'd been injured. His martial arts were recovering, but even so, his situation didn't improve. Every time he fought, he disturbed his injured meridians time and again, damaging them faster than they could heal. He'd also encountered a bottleneck while cultivating the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi and hadn't made any progress in a while. By itself, his original internal cultivation from Xuandu Mountain was unable to repair his damaged foundations.

Though he could claim he was used to the feeling, it was still agonizing. He was forced to lean against the horse for a brief rest, thinking that he'd get up again after the excruciating dizziness passed. With his current state, it was impossible for him to ride the horse back to the city.

But just then, he heard someone speak from a short distance away. "Sect Leader Shen, have you ever heard of the saying: 'the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware that the oriole stalks it in turn'?"

The voice was neither loud nor quiet, nor was there any swagger to it. It was simply a polite inquiry.

It almost sounded as if the speaker was asking for directions instead of issuing a provocation.

Shen Qiao didn't open his eyes. Hoarsely, he said, "I'm afraid this gentleman's voice is a little unfamiliar to me. I don't think we've met."

"Yes, this is our first meeting," said the newcomer, unfailingly courteous. "I didn't expect Bai Rong to be a step ahead of me. But it's fortunate that she was, otherwise I would never have had this wonderful chance. Are you all right?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "Forgive my rudeness. I can't stand."

"It's fine," the man said considerately.

Despite his words, he didn't move to help Shen Qiao, nor did he leave.

Shen Qiao sighed. "I still don't know this gentleman's esteemed name."

The man laughed. "Though we've only just met, I feel as if we're old friends already. I was so lost in my awe that I almost forgot to introduce myself. My last name is Guang, and I come from the west of the Yellow River. At the moment, I'm a drifting roamer with no set residence."

Guang was a rare last name; the number of people bearing it in the jianghu could be counted on one hand.

"What merit does this humble Shen have, for someone as esteemed as the Fajing Sect Leader to pay me a personal visit?"

"This humble Guang has admired Sect Leader Shen for a long time," said Guang Lingsan. "Unfortunately, we never had the opportunity to meet before today. When word arrived that Sect Leader Shen had fallen from the cliff, this Guang was full of lament. I never imagined that I'd get the chance to see you defeat two people in a row today! What wonderful fortune!"

Shen Qiao forced a smile. "Enough with the flowery words, Sect Leader Guang. If you have something to say, say it. For I fear I won't last much longer before I pass out. Then I won't be able to hear anything you wanted to say."

Guang Lingsan didn’t need to experience it himself to know that Shen Qiao must be in excruciating agony. Seeing that Shen Qiao could still manage to chat and laugh, his respect for him grew.

“Sect Leader Yan took something from Fajing Sect,” he told Shen Qiao. “Even now, he has yet to return it, so I have no choice but to invite Sect Leader Shen for a stay at Fajing Sect.”

“Then I fear you’ve miscalculated,” said Shen Qiao. “All I do for Sect Leader Yan is waste his food. A pair of his chopsticks are probably more valuable than I am.”

Even speaking one sentence exhausted a great deal of his strength. After he forced the words out, he closed his eyes, his brows furrowing. His complexion was ghastly white, and he looked as if he might pass away at any moment.

Guang Lingsan was also afraid that Shen Qiao might suddenly die. He reached out, wanting to check his pulse and pass him some qi.

He hadn’t yet touched Shen Qiao’s wrist when he jerked and then retreated dozens of meters!

A shallow ditch had appeared in the ground where Guang Lingsan had been standing just a moment before.

“Outsiders all say that Sect Leader Yan brought the injured Sect Leader Shen back in order to humiliate him and make him a plaything. It looks like they might be wrong!” Guang Lingsan said, all smiles. “It’s been so long, and Sect Leader Yan’s splendor has only grown!”

Yan Wushi glanced at Shen Qiao, who seemed to have either fainted or fallen asleep. His arms hung limply, a stretch of blood stained the end of his sleeve, and his eyes were closed. He was completely unconscious.

Yan Wushi swiveled his gaze back to Guang Lingshan. “In my years of absence, Hehuan Sect crushed Fajing Sect so badly that you couldn’t even remain in the Central Plains and were forced to retreat to Tuyuhun. What an incompetent sect leader you are.”

“Naturally, I’m not as capable as Sect Leader Yan,” said Guang Lingsan. “You’ve even got the Sect Leader of Xuandu Mountain to use as a bedwarmer and a host for parasitic cultivation. You can even use him to test

your martial arts. That's three birds with one stone. Everyone else is just jealous that they'll never have anything similar. At first, I wanted to borrow him for a couple of days, but I didn't expect that Sect Leader Yan valued him so much that you'd rush over here at top speed!"

Guang Lingsan was dressed as a scholar and had been born with his gentle and refined looks, but his words were completely unreserved and archetypal of the demonic sects.

"I heard that Fajing Sect has been greatly successful in Tuyuhun over the years, so much so that Kualu Khagan trusts you completely. The more remote the location, the freer you are—you truly took to the place like a fish to water."

Yan Wushi's tone always carried a hint of ridicule. The ill-tempered would grow enraged just listening to him, but due to Yan Wushi's martial prowess, there was nothing they could do about it—they could never defeat him. So, over time, this tone became a hallmark of his.

Guang Lingsan smiled slightly. "We cannot compare with how deeply the Lord of Zhou values Sect Leader Yan. Northern Zhou is under your Huanyue Sect's influence, while Hehuan Sect monopolizes the trust of the Emperor of Qi. In the south, Chen Dynasty has Linchuan Academy, while the Buddhist and Daoist sects scowl on the sidelines. Our Fajing Sect is alone and weak. All we could do was head far away."

Yan Wushi's graceful, slender eyes narrowed just a touch. "If that's the case, why not stay in Tuyuhun and continue your operations there? Why did you come to Zhou Dynasty?"

"Naturally, it was to seek out Sect Leader Yan. I would like Sect Leader Yan to return the Xiangchen bone to Fajing Sect."

"Return?" said Yan Wushi with a sneer. "Is your name carved upon it?"

"It belonged to my master," said Guang Lingsan coldly. "Why wouldn't it be mine?"

Yan Wushi laughed. "Ten years ago, you'd never have dared to say such words to my esteemed self. Where is this bravado coming from? Just how much leopard guts[3] did you eat over the past ten years?"

Though strength was everything in the jianghu, normally they also maintained a thin veneer they called morals and ethics. But the demonic sects took this principle to its most extreme. As long as you were strong, you could have anything you wanted. And if you were weak, even if you died, you only had yourself to blame. Ten years ago, before Yan Wushi's secluded cultivation, he'd crushed the other two sects so utterly that they didn't even dare to breathe too loudly. But a person could forget many things in ten years—even fear.

Of course, Yan Wushi's martial prowess had soared during his ten years of seclusion, but others had made progress too. Furthermore, Guang Lingsan was also one of the top ten martial artists in the world. Even if there was a gap between them, it certainly wasn't an uncrossable chasm.

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Shen Qiao groaned quietly as he struggled to lift his heavy lids and open his eyes.

A blurred mass of shadow and light crept into his vision. It wasn't absolute darkness, but what he could see was limited. It wasn't too different from being completely blind, so he simply closed his eyes once again.

A gentle voice came from beside his ear. "You're awake, Shen-langjun? The medicine is ready and is still hot. This lowly one will help you drink."

It was Ruru's voice. Shen Qiao recognized it—the voice of the maid from the Junior Preceptor's Residence. She'd taken care of everything for him during his time in the Junior Preceptor's residence.

"…This is the Junior Preceptor's residence?" Shen Qiao only recalled meeting Guang Lingsan, then being unable to hold on and passing out.

Ruru covered her mouth and giggled. "Of course your esteemed self is in the Junior Preceptor's Residence. How could Ruru be here otherwise? The master brought you back."

She brought the medicine to him and helped him drink, then straightened the bedding beneath him. "The doctor was here and said you're

suffering from qi and blood deficiency. You must take some blood-enriching medication."

Shen Qiao nodded. "Where is Sect Leader Yan?"

"The master is in the study with Da-langjun."

The one she called Da-langjun was none other than Bian Yanmei.

Perhaps there were calming agents in the bowl of medicine, for after a few sentences, Shen Qiao involuntarily dozed off again. When he woke once more, the room was already dark, and there was a blurred silhouette at his side.

"Sect Leader Yan?" He groped his way into a sitting position.

Yan Wushi put down the book he held but didn't move to help him, merely grunting in reply.

"Guang Lingshan left?" asked Shen Qiao.

"He did," said Yan Wushi. "After we fought."

"He's skilled, but he shouldn't have been a match for you."

That was his only comment on the incident. He didn't seem surprised at Yan Wushi's timely appearance, nor did he ask about it.

"I heard that you fought with Duan Wenyang in the Su residence," said Yan Wushi.

"That man was incredibly skilled. Given enough time, he might become as strong as the Hulugu was."

"How is he compared to Kunye?"

"Quite a bit stronger than Kunye."

"In that case, you only won through pure luck."

Shen Qiao didn't play himself up. "True. He had just suffered some minor injuries fighting Li Qingyu. I took advantage of that."

"I checked your pulse just now," said Yan Wushi. "When you fell from the cliff that day, Joyful Reunion's poison had already penetrated deep into your marrow and destroyed your foundations. I used to think that the *Zhuyang Strategy* could repair your meridians, but examining you now, I see that having only two scrolls of five yields minimal results. The fact that

you’re constantly fighting and getting injured is even more problematic. That will only worsen the damage to your Daoist core. If you go on like this and your Daoist core is completely destroyed, even the gods won’t be able to save you. No matter how powerful the *Zhuyang Strategy* is, it cannot do what even the gods cannot.”

The Daoist core wasn’t any simple core; it held the foundations of Shen Qiao’s martial arts, and it lay at the base of the internal cultivation he had built up from childhood. If his Daoist core were destroyed, then all of his moves and techniques would be rendered useless, for he could never again strive for that martial zenith.

This was Shen Qiao’s current situation: due to his injury and poisoning, his Daoist core was on the verge of destruction. At this point, gradual restoration via the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s true qi should have been the best way to heal it.

But the problem lay in Shen Qiao only knowing two of the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s scrolls, instead of all five. Making matters worse, it was impossible for him to stay uninvolved in matters within the jianghu. Every time he fought, his qi was inevitably affected, which damaged his Daoist core. Over time, the problem became a vicious cycle. If a day came where the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s true qi could no longer repair the damage, then that would mean his foundations had collapsed completely, and he’d be beyond all saving.

Incidentally, Yan Wushi had also contributed to the repeated damage to Shen Qiao’s foundations. If he hadn’t forced Shen Qiao to fight him again and again, Shen Qiao wouldn’t be adding new injuries on top of his old, unhealed ones.

But at this moment, Sect Leader Yan’s expression was earnest and solemn, as if he’d selectively forgotten his share of responsibility.

Shen Qiao didn’t know whether to call him shameless or egotistical. “Are you saying you have a solution?”

Yan Wushi was unruffled. “Indeed, I do. If you’re willing to toss out your Daoist core and allow me to implant a demonic core inside of you, and then you cultivate the *Fenglin Scriptures*, everything will be solved in one stroke.”

Shen Qiao sighed. “I cannot help but admire Sect Leader Yan’s careful and meticulous execution of his plans. Once the demonic core is implanted, I’ll inevitably become temperamental and erratic, savage and bloodthirsty. It might be a happy thing to you, but for me, it would be like losing my true self. Even if it greatly advanced my martial arts, what meaning would there be?”

Yan Wushi took on a mocking expression. “What is a true self? Humans are evil by nature. Is doing as you desire not true to your true self? Look at that Chen Gong. You showed him so much kindness and even traveled together, sharing with him trials and tribulations. But when a crisis arose, even though there were clearly a hundred different ways he could have extricated himself, all he thought to do was draw the disaster to you and drag you down with him. Given his background, no one had ever taught him how to read or behave. Was what he did not true to his true self?”

Shen Qiao wanted to turn his head away, but he was forcibly yanked back by a hand on his chin, preventing his escape. “There was only one reason you were able to faithfully follow your Daoist core and refuse to give up on your so-called principles,” said Yan Wushi. “It’s because you’ve never been in a situation so hopeless that you could no longer endure. Am I right?”

A pair of dull, vacant eyes blinked, their long eyelashes trembling. After a long time, Shen Qiao finally spat out a word, “Yes.”

Yan Wushi’s tone brimmed with malice. “No matter how powerful the *Zhuyang Strategy* is, it can’t create something out of nothing. There is no way you’ll recover your martial arts in a couple of years with the state you’re in—your foundations damaged, fainting and vomiting blood at the drop of a hat. You might even linger in this half-dead state for the rest of your life. Now that everyone has seen you appear at the Su residence with the Junior Preceptor’s invitation, news of our relationship will spread quickly throughout the jianghu. My venerable self has enemies everywhere; they can’t touch me, but you’re an easy target. What do you think they’ll do to you if they catch you? Will they torture you into writing out the *Zhuyang Strategy*? Or will they rape and kill you first, and then rape your corpse some more out of spite?

“When that happens, can you still find such a situation endurable?”

Finally, Shen Qiao couldn’t take it anymore. “We can talk about that when it actually happens! Sect Leader Yan need not trouble himself before then!”

Yan Wushi’s hand had been slapped aside, but he wasn’t angry. Instead, he snorted a laugh, his mood lightening. “Come on, I was only scaring you a little. Just that was enough to upset you?”

Shen Qiao was speechless.

There was a saying that grasping a woman’s heart was like finding a needle on the ocean floor, but Shen Qiao felt that grasping Yan Wushi’s heart was as impossible as finding a needle in a bottomless abyss.

At that moment, there came a knock on the door.

“Enter,” said Yan Wushi.

The maid Ruru came in with a bowl of medicine. “Master, this is the second bowl of soup that was prepared for Shen-langjun today.”

“Put it here,” said Yan Wushi.

Ruru put the bowl down as asked, then reminded Shen Qiao, “Shen-langjun must drink it while hot for utmost effectiveness.”

Shen Qiao thanked her, then took the bowl and drank it in one gulp.

Shen Qiao had one small shortcoming: he liked sweet things and hated bitter ones. As a child on the Xuandu Mountain, whenever he got sick, he would hide and refuse to take his medicine. When he heard that internal cultivation could make one impervious to the heat and cold, he put his all into his training. Everyone else thought he was extra hardworking, while in truth he was just trying to escape the bitter medicine. But here at Yan Wushi’s residence, no matter how many bowls of medicine were brought to him, he drank them all without objection.

His little habits betrayed him, though—every time before he raised the bowl, his brows would furrow a little, and when he put the bowl down, the corners of his mouth would twitch.

Yan Wushi saw all of this. When Shen Qiao finished the medicine, he picked up a candied preserve from the table and shoved it into Shen Qiao’s mouth. “A-Qiao, if you dislike bitter things,” he said in a honeyed tone,

“I’ll ask them to put some barley sugar in your medicine in the future. Now smile for me. Don’t frown so much.”

Shen Qiao, lost for words, was utterly exhausted in both body and mind.

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Chapter 36:
Meeting the Emperor

RURU COULDN'T RESIST smiling knowingly at the sight of Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao being so intimate with one another. She'd been with Shen Qiao for many days and admired his character and conduct greatly, so she hoped that the master would treat him well. Of course, she didn't understand how difficult it was for Shen Qiao as he choked on that piece of candied fruit. His stomach roiled, and he longed to spit it out and return it to Yan Wushi. But that would be out of character for Shen Qiao, so in the end he was forced to swallow it. It seemed like today's medicine tasted more bitter than ever—even the candied fruit was no help.

Yan Wushi smiled as he watched, supporting his chin on one hand. Seeing that Shen Qiao was about to lose his temper, he slowly said, "I went to the palace to meet the Emperor of Zhou today. He asked me to tell you that he wants to meet with you."

Shen Qiao jolted, his attention successfully diverted. "Meet with me?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll take you to the palace. He'll meet with you after morning court, at around seven."

"I'm nothing more than a countryside commoner now. Does Sect Leader Yan know why the emperor wishes to meet with me?"

"Take a guess."

With Yan Wushi's malicious personality, there was no way he'd answer so easily, so Shen Qiao paused to ponder the issue.

"I attended the birthday celebration at the Su residence just today. The emperor can't possibly know that I fought with Duan Wenyang already, so it can't be about that. Then, it must be because of Xuandu Mountain? Because Yu Ai was invited by the Göktürks for a lecture? Northern Zhou and the Khaganate are allied for the moment, but deep down they're wary of each other and have never trusted one another. So the emperor wishes for me to do something?"

“How clever of you!” Yan Wushi clapped his hands. “See, I didn’t say a word, and you still guessed most of it yourself.”

Shen Qiao frowned. “Then what does the emperor want of me?”

“You’ll know when you go tomorrow. There’s something else I want you to do.”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “I can’t help with anything cruel or immoral.”

“What are you thinking?” Yan Wushi laughed softly. His fingers gently brushed over the side of Shen Qiao’s face before landing on Shen Qiao’s lips.

He couldn’t avoid it in time. Yan Wushi even rubbed at his mouth so that his lips blushed, blood-tinted.

Finally, Yan Wushi said, “Xuandu Mountain prospered during the Qin-Han dynasties. I heard that the first sect leader of Xuandu Mountain was a wandering Daoist priest who specialized at telling someone’s fortune by the sound of their voice. Even Xu Fu[4] was once his disciple.”

Shen Qiao laughed. “People love to tell tall tales. I don’t know whether the founder of Xuandu Mountain had anything to do with the Marquis of Ci, but fortune-telling through facial features is an essential skill for Daoists. Doing it by the sound of a voice does seem even more incredible, but in truth it’s nothing special. Since the body produces the voice, you can hear whether someone’s in good health or bad. For example, if there’s excessive fire in someone’s lungs,[5] their voice will be hoarse and quiet, akin to a hand bellows. As long as you have some knowledge of martial arts and medicine, it’s not hard to identify such issues.”

As soon as Shen Qiao said all this, Yan Wushi knew that he must have studied it extensively at some point. “I want you to listen to Yuwen Yong’s voice,” he said.

Shen Qiao frowned. “The Zhou Palace does not lack for master physicians. The four methods of diagnosis—sight, hearing, questioning, and pulse-checking—are fundamental to the medical discipline. If the Emperor of Zhou truly is ill, how could none of those doctors have detected it? My skills are only mediocre—I fear I won’t be able to help.”

“In his early years, Yuwen Yong saw his own brother die by poisoning when their cousin bribed his physician. From then on, he’s refused to consult any doctors and isn’t willing to let them treat him for illness. However, since he’s been managing state affairs day and night for many years, disease took root in him long ago. My own judgment tells me that it’s likely the damage is already done, but I still need you to give him a listen.”

Shen Qiao thought for a while, then nodded slightly. “Very well.”

A smile crept across Yan Wushi’s face. “My A-Qiao is the best.”

Shen Qiao’s face was blank.

“I have a present for you,” said Yan Wushi.

He clapped his hands, calling in a maid from outside. “Does Master need something?”

“Bring me the sword case that I keep in the study,” he told her.

The maid assented, then quickly returned with the sword case and presented it to him with both hands. Yan Wushi took it and caressed it a bit before placing it in Shen Qiao’s arms with a small smile.

At first, Shen Qiao was a little confused. He groped around and unlatched the lock on top of the sword case. When his fingers brushed the sword inside, joy bubbled up inside him. “Shanhe Tongbei?”

“Do you like it?” Yan Wushi smiled brightly.

“Thank you, Sect Leader Yan, for taking such good care of it.” When Shen Qiao had awakened after his fall from the cliff, Shanhe Tongbei hadn’t been with him. At that time, his memories were fragmented, leaving him unable to remember the sword at all. Later, when he did recall it, he’d asked Yan Wushi about it. But he received no answer, and so he’d never asked again. After all, the sword might not even be with Yan Wushi—it could have gone missing with his fall. And, even if it were with Yan Wushi, Shen Qiao would have been far too ashamed to wield it, given how weak he was back then.

But how could he be unhappy about recovering what he’d lost? His shizun had given him the sword as a gift when Shen Qiao was seven, and it hadn’t left his side for a moment since. The sword made the man—to Shen

Qiao, it had long ago ceased to be a mere sword. He held Shanhe Tongbei in both hands and stroked the surface with his palms again and again. His sheer happiness was so palpable that a shining radiance seemed to suffuse his face, transforming him into a figure carved from pure white jade.

Everyone loved beautiful people, and Yan Wushi was no exception. Though he wasn't the type to soften before a pretty face, that didn't stop him from delighting in the sight of one, and he immediately began to tease.

"Come, another smile."

Shen Qiao did not reply.

He withdrew his smile, even pressing his lips together tightly. When Yan Wushi saw this, he could only regretfully stop himself and say, "Who's that severe expression for, A-Qiao? I've returned your sword to its rightful owner, untouched. How will you thank me for it?"

By now, Shen Qiao had learned to be sly as well. "Didn't Sect Leader Yan return Shanhe Tongbei to me because I agreed to enter the palace with him and meet the Emperor of Zhou?"

Yan Wushi laughed. "All right," he said, letting it go. "Whatever you say."

Shen Qiao paid no heed to his lunacy. Instead, he said, "As you said, it will be terribly difficult to restore my damaged foundations to their original condition, even with the *Zhuyang Strategy* volumes. However, I will not forsake Daoism to pursue the demonic path. You wish to raise me up as an opponent, but I fear you'll need to wait another eight or ten years, and even then you may not see it happen. If Sect Leader Yan will permit me, I'd like to leave Zhou after my meeting with the emperor."

Yan Wushi was unconcerned. "And where could you go after leaving Zhou? Without my protection, and in your condition, a series of fights will carve you to pieces."

"There may be countless ways to cultivate," said Shen Qiao, "but ultimately they can be reduced down to two: to detach from the world or to immerse yourself in it. Since I've chosen the latter, I must experience the many trials and tribulations that arise from worldly desires in order to pursue my path. I may lack strength now, but I can still come up with

methods to protect myself. If I keep relying on Sect Leader Yan for protection, how is that any different from remaining on Xuandu Mountain?”

How very like Shen Qiao to say such a thing. Even when he’d fallen into the mire, when he was smeared with dust and grime and was at anyone’s mercy, still he struggled back to his feet and walked onward, step by step. His comrades’ betrayal, his kindness being repaid with enmity—it was as if he’d taken none of it to heart.

It…truly made someone long to crush him beneath their heel one more time, just to see how much more he could take before he collapsed completely.

Wouldn’t that face look even better stained in tears and begging miserably?

Yan Wushi laughed. “Of course my venerable self won’t stop you if you wish to leave. But I do advise you to delay a little. Recently, Zhou and Chen have decided to form an alliance, so Linchuan Academy escorted Chen’s envoy here. And now the Emperor of Zhou also wishes to reply to the alliance treaty, so he’ll be sending his own envoy to Chen in return. He’s afraid Qi will attempt to obstruct these plans, so he’s asked Huanyue Sect to be escorts on the journey. Originally, this task was assigned to Bian Yanmei, but I intend to go myself because I want to meet Ruyan Kehui.

“The leader of the Confucian sects, one of the top three martial artists in the world, is going to fight my venerable self. Don’t you want to see it with your own eyes?”

No matter how detached Shen Qiao was, he couldn’t resist such a temptation. His expression flickered. “Has Sect Leader Yan already sent the challenge letter to Academy Master Ruyan?”

“Why would I need a challenge letter?” Yan Wushi said with a mocking smile. “A-Qiao, just because you’re not the aggressive type, do you think everyone else is the same? If Ruyan Kehui knows I’ll be going south of the Yangtze, will he not exhaust every means in order to meet me? If he can defeat me, he’ll raise his reputation by a fair amount, and if I lose, it’ll damage Huanyue Sect’s reputation, striking a blow to our influence in Northern Zhou. If Huanyue Sect were gone, it would mean opportunity for many—both those looking to seize wealth and those who want me out of

the way so they can gain Yuwen Yong's trust. Such an excellent deal with manifold returns—who knows how many would jump at the chance!"

Shen Qiao thought about it and agreed. Although he didn't approve of Yan Wushi's ways and actions, he greatly admired his martial arts achievements. Excited, he quickly replied, "A duel between the two of the greatest masters in the world—how incredible that would be. Anyone in the jianghu would yearn for a glimpse. If the news spreads, then even if the duel takes place in the deep mountains or remote forests, it would still be packed to the seams with people jostling for a view."

And yet, Yan Wushi just had to say, "Ah, just like when you lost to Kunye on Banbu Peak. The very moment you disgraced yourself, the entire world knew."

This man really was exceptionally scathing. Shen Qiao immediately shut his mouth and stopped talking.

Yan Wushi burst out laughing. "But it's not a bad idea at all. Confucians love to lecture people with their lengthy speeches, and Ruyan Kehui's mouthiness has always annoyed me terribly. If I defeat him in front of everyone and then force him, in public, to swear to shut up, that'd probably be a fate worse than death for him!"

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Early the next morning, Shen Qiao entered the palace with Yan Wushi.

The Emperor of Zhou had taken Shen Qiao's sight into consideration—he even sent them a carriage. This allowed them to enter the palace and drive all the way to Qian'an Hall without interruptions, forgoing the journey from the palace gates to the main hall.

After the Han Dynasty fell, there had come the chaos of the Three Kingdoms period. And it hadn't taken long after the Jin Dynasty managed to unify the land for the flames of war to spark again. The Jin were forced to move their capital and restrict their reign to the southeast. Then it was another hundred-plus years of chaos with the Sixteen Kingdoms period, all

without a unified ruling dynasty. Rulers lacked the manpower and wealth to build large-scale palaces because none of them knew when their country might be overthrown. Any king, no matter how negligible his accomplishments, invested his resources to war first and foremost in order to seize more land and wealth. The various rulers of Northern Zhou had done exactly this, so the palace of Northern Zhou wasn't particularly large—its scale was nowhere near the likes of Weiyang Palace or Changle Palace[6] during the Han Dynasty.

As the current Emperor of Zhou, Yuwen Yong had a reputation as a somewhat polarizing figure. He led a humble lifestyle and cared for his people, but at the same time, he was paranoid and harsh on his ministers. When he came into power, he prohibited both Buddhism and Daoism, and later he even distanced himself from Confucianism. Instead, he began to support Legalism, which had been in gradual decline since the rule of Han's Emperor Wu. He also relied on Huanyue Sect to shore up his influence and impose his authority, which led many to denounce him. The opinions on Yuwen Yong that Shen Qiao had heard since leaving Xuandu Mountain ranged widely from praise to criticism. It did seem, however, that there was more criticism than praise.

And so, Shen Qiao hesitated when Yuwen Yong asked him a question after his polite summons. "I heard that you, sir, have spent this time wandering among the common folk and have been subject to much suffering," said the emperor. "So you must have also witnessed many of their hardships as well. What are their opinions of me?"

Still, Shen Qiao said truthfully, "There is veneration, but also reproach."

Yuwen Yong laughed. "For what do they venerate? And for what do they reproach?"

"Those who venerate praise Your Majesty's humble lifestyle, how you refuse luxury and root out political corruption. Those who reproach criticize Your Majesty for persecuting Buddhism and Daoism, your harsh treatment of others, and your singular focus on militarism."

"You were once the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain," said Yuwen Yong. "As I've prohibited Buddhism and Daoism, I'm your enemy as well. Do you not hate me?"

His questions came one after another, as if the emperor was trying to force something out of him. Yan Wushi watched coldly from the sidelines; he had no intention of helping Shen Qiao.

“May this one ask why Your Majesty prohibits Buddhism and Daoism?” Shen Qiao asked.

“When the common people blindly practice Buddhism and Daoism, they donate away their savings and stop producing, hoping that they’ll be granted whatever they wish in their next life. The Buddhist and Daoist temples gather vast hoards of gold and land while bringing farmers into their folds. Like so, they evade taxes and keep the fields’ crops for themselves. If this keeps on, the court will end up empty-handed, while the Buddhist and Daoist organizations grow ever stronger. They’ll no longer fear the law, and eventually they will become hotbeds of unrest. It was like this sixty years ago when Faqing[7] claimed he was a new buddha and led the people to revolt.”

Since ancient times, the king held higher authority than any religion. And so, whenever a religion became large enough to threaten a regime, the sovereign would begin ordering persecutions and bans. But this time in particular, Daoism had been collateral damage—to prevent future trouble, Yuwen Yong had chosen to ban both schools of thought at once.

As for Confucianism, Yuwen Yong’s original decree had deemed Confucianism the best of the three. But then Ruyan Kehui politely declined the emperor’s personal invitation to lecture at Chang’an. Furious, Yuwen Yong had then banned Confucianism as well, and with this offended all three schools.

Once he was finished, Yuwen Yong looked at Shen Qiao. “As a practitioner of Daoism, you must think what I did was wrong,” he said.

“The Dao is like water—water benefits all living things without demanding anything in return,” replied Shen Qiao. “The law of Dao is the law of nature, and practitioners should flow with the current while remaining aloof. To conform oneself to the natural order, to human sensibilities, that is the Dao.”

Within his words was an implication that the Daoists who reaped benefits at the cost of others were ultimately no more than degenerates.

They might be associated with the school of thought, but they could not represent Daoism themselves.

Witnessing Shen Qiao's prompt answer and clear stance, Yuwen Yong's face relaxed. Shen Qiao was different from all the Daoists who'd tried everything to put in a good word for their banned discipline.

"I've long heard of Xuandu Mountain, but only today did I have the good fortune to meet you," said Yuwen Yong with a delighted smile. "Truly, your reputation is well earned! Every passing day I've had to listen to all these people defending Buddhism and Daoism—I should really let them listen to your words just now! I've never crushed true Daoism, just those who bluff and deceive in the name of immortals. They benefit neither the country nor the people; it's better to root them out and be done with it!"

His voice brimmed with murderous intent.

Now this made it hard for Shen Qiao to follow up. Though he wasn't the kind who amassed land and gold, he was still a Daoist, so he couldn't show unabashed support for Yuwen Yong's persecution of Daoism.

Yuwen Yong had never expected to hear any flattering words from him either. As he looked at Shen Qiao, who was seated below him and to the left, his tone gentled. "With this first meeting, I already feel as if we are old friends," he said. "You conduct yourself admirably, and I wish to help you re-establish Daoism, to rebuild the Daoist sects. What do you think?"

"This humble Daoist doesn't understand what Your Majesty means," said Shen Qiao. "May he ask for further clarification?"

Yuwen Yong had always been a decisive and straightforward person, and he disliked beating around the bush. "I've heard from Junior Preceptor Yan that you were only defeated on Banbu Peak due to a treacherous plot. If that's the case, then Xuandu's Violet Palace does not have the right to depose you from the position of sect leader. Even if there's no place for you there, other places exist. Since you can no longer stay on Xuandu Mountain, why not re-establish Xuandu Mountain here in Chang'an? With your incredible talents, you will shine brightly wherever you are."

At last, astonishment came over Shen Qiao's face.

Yuwen Yong had been very straightforward. He meant for Shen Qiao to set up a sect in Chang'an, another Xuandu's Violet Palace. Since Qi

Fengge had appointed him sect leader in the first place, it would all be right and proper, and no one could call him a fake.

But, if this happened, there would be two Xuandu's Violet Palaces, and the new sect Shen Qiao established would be in opposition with the original Xuandu Mountain, far across the land.

Unspoken was the implication that Yuwen Yong would use the power of the imperial court to support Shen Qiao, but of course this help wouldn't come for free. Shen Qiao's newly founded sect would be weak to begin with, which would force him to rely on the court for support. Therefore, what Yuwen Yong truly wanted was to use Shen Qiao to seed his own influence and voice among the Daoist sects.

Of course, Shen Qiao would benefit from the arrangement too. If he agreed, he would be leader of a sect just like any other, and Yan Wushi would no longer be able to treat him like a plaything.

He looked at Yan Wushi, who was kneeling, his posture exuding the languid nonchalance that could only belong to the Huanyue Sect Leader. His expression was the same—relaxed and careless. The shadow of a smile hung on his lips, as if Yuwen Yong's words posed no threat to him at all. Instead, he seemed to be greatly interested in what Shen Qiao would say in reply.

Shen Qiao didn’t spend much time thinking it over. “This one is deeply thankful to Your Majesty,” he said directly to Yuwen Yong, “but he doesn’t have the moral qualifications. So he fears he must disappoint Your Majesty.”

Yuwen Yong was rather surprised and unhappy with this answer. In his eyes, even though his intent to consolidate power was apparent, his suggestion would still grant Shen Qiao countless benefits with no drawbacks.

Meanwhile, Yan Wushi snorted. “I already told Your Majesty that A-Qiao is an upright gentleman who’d only break but not bend—that he wouldn’t accept Your Majesty’s suggestion. But Your Majesty didn’t believe me and wanted to make a bet with me. Now that Your Majesty has lost, what prize have I won?”

At this interruption, Yuwen Yong grudgingly said, “I don’t understand. You’ve already fallen so far. Do you have no desire at all to rise again? Are you content to surrender Xuandu Mountain? To let the world misunderstand you, believe you useless?”

Shen Qiao smiled but didn’t speak.

No matter how unhappy Yuwen Yong was with the rejection, it wasn’t like he could arrest Shen Qiao for it. “Very well,” the emperor said, resigned. “This gentleman can take some time to think it over. If you change your mind, you can come and tell me anytime.”

Then he smiled at Yan Wushi. “No treasures in the world are out of reach for the Junior Preceptor. There’s only one precious item in this palace, the *Zhuyang Strategy* scroll, and you’ve already read it. What else could you have in your sights? Why not let me save some face? Allow me to entertain the two of you for lunch today.”

With his forceful personality, it was rare to see him speaking to someone so casually. But Yuwen Yong felt a kinship with Yan Wushi, who was a powerful man just like him. The emperor treated Yan Wushi with comparatively more respect than his average court ministers.

Before leaving, Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao took their lunch inside the palace. The moment they left the palace gates and entered the Junior Preceptor’s carriage, Yan Wushi asked, “So?”

Shen Qiao frowned. “Judging from his voice, I fear fire has been rampant in his liver for a while. Prolonged inflammation invites ruin—he may not have long to live.”

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Chapter 37:
Probing

YAN WUSHI mulled it over in silence.

“I’m no expert, nor am I a physician,” said Shen Qiao, “so I might not have heard very clearly. You should still personally petition His Majesty to call in a physician. That would be best.”

In truth, Yuwen Yong might not be suffering from a deadly disease, but since he’d seized power back from his cousin Yuwen Hu, he’d worked around the clock and kept his guard up at all times. Not a day went by that he didn’t throw himself into government affairs. He’d even given away the position of empress in order to win over the Göktürks, and to demonstrate his sincerity, he had to treat her with loving affection. To an emperor, especially a powerful emperor like Yuwen Yong, this was a humiliation. He’d started with excellent health, so there’d been no signs of deterioration during the early years. But as time went on, even a body of steel couldn’t take such wear and tear. The moment the four fundamentals of his health[8] collapsed, his body would crumple too.

But before that happened, he might show no clear symptoms at all. Even if an imperial physician were called, at most they’d cite things like fatigue and vitality depletion, tell him to rest and take care of his health for a while—the emperor would never listen.

Yan Wushi said nothing on the topic. “Why didn’t you agree to Yuwen Yong’s suggestion?” he asked Shen Qiao instead. “In your current situation, it would only benefit you.”

“I’m curious about something as well,” said Shen Qiao. “If I agreed to his proposal, and the new Daoist sect gained the court’s full support, that would undoubtedly affect Huanyue Sect’s authority in Zhou. Why does Sect Leader Yan remain unconcerned?”

“Because regardless of how many new sects the court establishes, they cannot affect Huanyue Sect’s standing,” said Yan Wushi. “Huanyue Sect can help Yuwen Yong with matters in ways no other sect can. Even if

they could, they'd think such things beneath them. So Yuwen Yong can only rely on Huanyue Sect. He's thirty-two this year, only just past his prime. Even if he lives for ten more years, I'll be able to accomplish what I want."

Shen Qiao canted his head, a little doubtful. "To unify the three demonic sects?"

"Do you know how large the Han Dynasty's empire was?" asked Yan Wushi.

"If I recall correctly, at its peak it encompassed Wiman Joseon[9] to the east and Van Xuân[10] to the south, engulfed the Pamir Mountains[11] in the west, and stretched to the Yinshan Mountains in the north."

"And how large was the empire after Sima Zhao established the Jin Dynasty?"

Shen Qiao knit his brows. "By the time the Three Kingdoms had been unified under the Jin, a portion of their territories had already been lost in the chaos of the period. For example, ever since the Jin Dynasty, the eastern peninsular kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla[12] ceased to be part of the Central Plains. At the same time, the Xianbei and Qiang peoples gradually rose to power west of the Yellow River. The Jin Dynasty unified the Central Plains, but its might and wealth paled in comparison to the previous dynasties. And not long after came the War of the Eight Princes…"

Yan Wushi continued, "From then on, the Central Plains were splintered. First was the Uprising of the Five Barbarians, then the Sixteen Kingdoms period as the states supplanted each other one after another. The turmoil continues today—it's been two hundred and fifty-nine years."

Shen Qiao sighed. "In those two hundred fifty-nine years, foreign tribes have invaded time and again. Anyone who amasses a modicum of military power jumps to establish their own nation and declare themselves king, all while they're completely unable to defend it. And so wars arise again and again, breeding chaos, leaving refugees everywhere and corpses scattered throughout the land!"

Yan Wushi was smiling brightly. "Indeed. It's been over two hundred fifty years, and no one's been able to unify the land. The Linchuan

Academy declares themselves a legitimate representative of Confucianism, but they remain Han-centric. They observe strict separation between the Han and foreign ethnicities and believe that only the Chen Dynasty was chosen by heaven. Meanwhile Buddhism and Daoism hold grudges against Yuwen Yong for banning them and driving them out of Zhou. They imagine that a despot like him could never achieve unification."

Yan Wushi went on, asking, "How many people in the world, whether openly or in secret, seek to trip him up, crave to see misfortune befall him? The moment it happens, misfortune will naturally befall Northern Zhou as well, but I want the exact opposite—to support this unpopular emperor in uniting the land. Wouldn't it be awfully interesting if the demonic discipline can do what the self-proclaimed legitimate three schools can't?"

The more others said that something couldn't be done, the more he wanted to try. When everyone claimed that Yuwen Yong couldn't be an enlightened ruler because he was ruthless and tyrannical, it only made Yan Wushi support the emperor's ambitions more. He wanted to see them eat crow—all the naysayers and those who would stand in his way. His unpredictable character, the way he did as he pleased, left many grinding their teeth in helplessness. If they wanted to strike down Yuwen Yong, first they'd need to get past Yan Wushi, and he towered over them as unconquerable as a mountain, formidable enough to crush their spirits.

"I heard that the crown prince is still young," said Shen Qiao. "Why doesn't Sect Leader Yan assist the crown prince in the meantime and teach him? If the Lord of Zhou does indeed pass away, won't all of your efforts have been for naught?"

Yan Wushi played with a tassel hanging by the door. "And what if the crown prince is completely worthless and unteachable? Should I just grin and bear it? Help a dimwitted idiot onto the throne, then submit myself to him?"

The implications were really quite shocking—Shen Qiao was momentarily taken aback. "You wish to usurp the throne?"

Yan Wushi sputtered out a laugh. "What are you thinking? I have no interest in becoming emperor. Do you think Yuwen Yong lives a happy life? Every day he has to meet with people he dislikes, rattle off a bunch of

empty formalities, and he was even forced to marry a woman he dislikes to use her as a prop. He spends sleepless nights poring over paperwork from his officials, rises earlier than the roosters and rests later than the dogs. His only day-to-day satisfaction is the hollow glory of owning boundless land. Don't you feel sorry for him? If I became emperor, I fear that within three years I'll have drained the country dry. But given all that, aren't I far more carefree and at ease as I am?"

Shen Qiao shook his head. "Then I understand even less."

"With your intelligence, you can definitely guess. Try—if you're right, I'll give you a prize!"

He even drew out his final words, and it suddenly reminded Shen Qiao of Bai Rong's tone of affected cuteness. The corners of his mouth couldn't help but twitch, and he wondered if this was some distinctive habit of the demonic sects.

The man was terribly noxious, and it was often impossible to read his intentions through his words or actions—if you weren't careful, he might end up jerking you around. But Shen Qiao was forced to admit that Yan Wushi, compared to the average martial artist, possessed extraordinarily keen insight into the state of the world. Discussing these things with him benefited Shen Qiao greatly as well.

Yuweng Yong relied heavily on Huanyue Sect, but his successor might not do the same. Even today, the Buddhist discipline was snubbed because of the old regent Yuwen Hu's issues, so they'd jump at the chance to curry favor with the new emperor. Yan Wushi didn't want to usurp the throne; he also regarded the current crown prince with contempt. The Buddhist discipline would definitely take advantage of the opening to cozy up to the crown prince.

"Then Sect Leader Yan…wishes to support a different enlightened ruler?"

Yan Wushi was all smiles. "My A-Qiao is so clever!"

Shen Qiao's face grew dark. *Who's your A-Qiao?*

Yan Wushi pretended he saw nothing and reached over to pinch Shen Qiao's cheek. "Not bad! Yuwen Xian, the Prince Qi, disdains both Buddhism and Daoism. He's also brave and skillful in warfare, so he has

great support from the military. He'll definitely be able to live up to Yuwen Yong's ambitions."

He leaned in and whispered in Shen Qiao's ear, "This is a secret! I've never told anyone before, so you must keep mum about it too!"

Shen Qiao didn't answer.

Could he pretend that he'd heard nothing?

***

It was the fourth of April and a fine, sunny day.

The carriage wheels rumbled along outside, rolling ever onward, but the compartment inside was well dampened, which limited the jostling. A warm fragrance wafted through the raised curtains, sweet and cloying. From that, it was easy to surmise that the occupants inside were likely women.

Yu Zi had been on the road for almost half a month, but as they approached the border with Chen, she felt none of the fatigue expected from a long and arduous journey. Instead, her spirits rose, for she was originally from Jiangnan and had grown up in Jiankang. Now that she was returning to her hometown, joy bubbled insuppressibly within her. She couldn't resist peeking outside again and again, her shining eyes unblinking. The maid called to her several times before she turned back.

"Madam's soul is fit to fly away!" teased the maid.

"It's been ten years since I was last in Jiangnan!" Yu Zi couldn't resist glancing out once more. "I was still young when I left. I didn't find it particularly pretty back then. But seeing it again today, I've realized that all I can think about is Jiangnan. The north is wonderful, but it isn't my hometown, after all!"

"The Master was ordered to travel to Chen and deliver a letter to its emperor. Such an important duty, yet he didn't forget to bring the Madam. That shows his deep love for you—others might beg for such a blessing and never receive it!"

Yu Zi's cheeks flushed a faint pink, and she stayed shyly quiet.

She was the concubine of Court Councilor Yuwen Qing and had been wed to him for three years. Yuwen Qing adored her, and so everyone in the manor treated her as if she were his legal wife. He'd taken her along for his diplomatic mission to Chen, making his deep favor for her obvious.

It was a time of turmoil, and robbers ran rampant. Traveling merchants were often forced to seek the protection of the government or to hire a great number of bodyguards. When the merchants had seen an envoy of Zhou heading south, they'd all scrambled to pay him money in hopes of traveling together. Among them were many important merchants with close ties to Northern Zhou's royal family, so Yuwen Qing couldn't put them off—he brought them all with him. And so the procession of carriages grew, but there was the advantage of strength in numbers: they made a formidable impression as they journeyed. And, with the additional protection of skilled martial artists, no one dared be so reckless as to attack them.

They had just crossed the border of Yuan Province—there was still a long way to go before they'd arrive at the next provincial capital. When they finally reached a relay station, Yuwen Qing ordered a half-hour rest for them to reorganize. The procession slowly rolled to a stop. Some entered the station asking for hot water while others stayed where they were, eating some rations and resting.

The maid was young and thrilled at all the excitement. Yu Zi couldn't leave the carriage freely, but the maid was under no such restriction. She bounded around outside before returning to Yu Zi. "Madam," she said, "there's a carriage in our procession—it's located right behind the Master's—but no one has left it even though there are clearly people inside! It's so strange!"

Yu Zi was unconcerned. "Perhaps you missed them when they got out."

The maid shook her head. "No, other people told me about them, and they all think it very strange. It seems that no one has seen anyone get out, nor do they know who's inside. Are they even going to the bathroom in there? How disgusting!"

"Don't speak nonsense!" chided Yu Zi.

The maid stuck out her tongue. “The Master should know who they are. Why not ask him, Madam?”

“You can ask, then,” said Yu Zi. “I’m certainly not asking!”

“I overheard those merchants making bets,” said the maid. “They said that the carriage is large and opulent, so maybe there is…”

“Is what?”

“Is…is the Master’s beloved inside,” said the maid.

Yu Zi’s expression fell a little.

The maid quickly added, “It’s just nonsense from outsiders. This maid thinks that’s absurd—everyone knows that the Madam is the Master’s true beloved!”

At the moment, Yu Zi lived a life of luxury. She was heaped with boundless favors and doting, but she knew very well that everything she had was completely dependent on Yuwen Qing’s fondness for her. The moment that affection faded, a fate awaited her that might very well be worse than her own maid’s.

So she was incredibly sensitive to the ebb and flow of Yuwen Qing’s affections. When she heard that he might have found someone new, panic flooded her heart. If what the maid said was true, and the carriage really held another beauty whom she’d never heard of, then that spoke multitudes to how much Yuwen Qing treasured the newcomer. In that case, Yu Zi would be replaced very soon.

Yu Zi had stayed by Yuwen Qing’s side for a long time, minding her place—she never pried where she shouldn’t, nor pressed for more when Yuwen Qing was unwilling to tell her. This was one of the reasons he adored her, but today she was unable to contain herself. After an afternoon of feeling ill at ease, when evening fell and Yuwen Qing came to her carriage, Yu Zi spent a while gently and carefully attending to him before trying to probe.

“Master, this concubine is curious which sister of hers is inside the carriage behind yours. She must be stifled silly, sitting inside all day. Why not invite her over to this concubine’s carriage for some conversation? It can help dispel her boredom!”

For a moment, Yuwen Qing looked startled. Then he laughed. “All right, don’t probe for answers where you shouldn’t. It won’t do you any good. You need not worry about this matter; staying peacefully inside your own carriage is all you have to do!”

There was only the carriage wall between them and the outside, where people were coming and going. No matter how amorous Yuwen Qing was feeling, he couldn’t just make love to her right there. So after satisfying himself by fondling her all over, he reluctantly returned to his own carriage.

Once Yuwen Qing left, the young maid peeked in with a smile. “Does the Madam feel better now?”

Yu Zi glared at her, face flushed.

“I trust the Master must have consoled the Madam already. Just who *is* the beauty in the other carriage?”

Yu Zi shook her head. “He didn’t say, though I don’t think it’s a beauty. After all, I’m not the main wife—if the Master truly has a new sweetheart, why hide it, as if he’s afraid to tell me?”

Though she didn’t realize it herself, the end of her sentence was tinged in sour jealousy.

“But I saw a servant girl leaving the carriage!” said the young maid.

Yu Zi was stunned. “What?”

Worried that Yu Zi didn’t believe her, the maid continued, “It’s true! A maid was outside just now—she alighted with a waterskin, so she was probably leaving to fetch water. She was so pretty; all the merchants were staring at her! They didn’t even blink.”

“Could there really be a woman in there?” asked Yu Zi, anxious and doubtful.

“Why not give me something of yours, Madam? I can use it as a pretext to talk to them and take a peek?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Yu Zi. “If the Master finds out, he’ll be unhappy.”

“I’ll do it secretly, so the Master *doesn’t* find out,” said the maid. “The Madam must know who she is; that way you can come up with a

solution. Otherwise, you'll still be in the dark about her identity even when she takes your place someday!"

Yu Zi hesitated for a moment before plucking a jade hairpin from her head and handing it to the maid. "Then be careful, and don't let the Master find out. If you can't manage, it's fine."

"Please rest assured, Madam!"

The topic of their private conversation was a common one inside the manor. That night, Yuwen Qing didn't come back to Yu Zi's carriage, and she and her maid were resting inside as usual. Though there were no inns to stay at along the way, the martial experts of Zhou's imperial palace were escorting them, so Yu Zi was at ease. The entire journey thus far had been peacefully uneventful; other than being stuck inside the stuffy carriage, she had little to complain about.

Yu Zi had been asleep into the wee hours of the night when she felt a slight chill over her face. She opened her eyes in a daze, but before she could react, her mouth was covered.

Just then, someone laughed quietly in her ear. "How keen you are. However, you're quite lucky—I'm in a good mood tonight, so I won't kill you. That man was even willing to save the life of a horse. If he knew I killed you, he'd definitely despise me even more."

That was the last thing Yu Zi heard that night, for she lost consciousness quickly after.

The young maid even took the time to tuck her mistress in before exiting the carriage. Lifting her skirts, she ran toward Yuwen Qing's location in a fluster.

She was stopped outside the carriage and quietly called out, "Master! Master!"

Yuwen Qing hadn't fallen asleep yet. After a moment, the curtains lifted, revealing an impatient face. "What is it?!"

The young maid looked at the martial artists guarding the carriage, then whispered, somewhat embarrassed, "The Madam's time of the month is almost here, so she has a hard time sleeping soundly. She just had a nightmare, and she's crying… Could the Master please look in on her?"

There was a beauty traveling with him, yet he had to sleep alone with only his bedding for company; it was truly agonizing. So when Yuwen Qing heard this, a flame blazed to life in his heart. “I’ll go and see.”

The men Yuwen Yong sent with him moved to follow, and he quickly cleared his throat. “I’m only going to my concubine’s carriage to take a look. You need not come with me!”

All the martial artists had keen eyes and ears. If anything started in the carriage, they’d hear everything with perfect clarity without even trying. Inevitably, it would be embarrassing for the one being overheard.

The men were a bit displeased. They weren’t courtyard guards who could be ordered about. Officially, they were “martial artists under imperial employ,” but in actuality they were from Huanyue Sect and only took orders from Yan Wushi and Yuwen Yong. Normally they’d accompany the emperor—asking them to escort an envoy was already an insult to them. They had their own pride and halted their steps at Yuwen Qing’s words. When they saw him enter one of the carriages mere paces away, they gave it no further thought.

Yuwen Qing followed the young maid into the carriage. The moment the doors shut behind him, he felt that something was wrong. “Yu Zi? Why didn’t you light a lamp?”

He tried to turn around, but it was already too late.

A bone-chilling cold pierced his back—a jade hairpin, held by a delicate hand. It was simply too fast; in the span of a blink, the jade hairpin’s point had torn through his clothes and stabbed half an inch into his flesh.

Yuwen Qing’s mouth fell open, and his face was seized with terror. By now he knew he’d fallen into a trap, and he cursed his own stupidity for stopping the martial artists from following. Even though they were only a few steps away, his attacker had enough time to gore straight through to his heart.

He could already see hell beckoning to him.

But as the next moment rolled by, the jade hairpin advanced no farther—instead, it was withdrawn, yanked out of his body. Yuwen Qing collapsed forward, landing right on top of the unconscious Yu Zi.

There was a beauty in his arms, but he wasn’t in the mood at all. He screamed for help and whipped his head back.

The young maid who’d attacked him quickly retreated. In an instant, she drifted several meters away from the carriage. But there was someone even faster—a blue shadow caught up to her, and the two of them appeared to exchange strikes. The young maid groaned in pain, and her body was flung to the side.

“Junior Preceptor! Save me, Preceptor!” Yuwen Qing was overjoyed. He was practically raring to leap onto Yan Wushi and cling to him like a limpet.

But at that moment, the air split loudly around them as countless shadowy figures suddenly materialized in the darkness and pounced toward him.

Yuwen Qing’s delight transformed into terror. Ignoring his bleeding back, he stumbled and crawled far into the carriage as the experts escorting him engaged the enemy.

When they’d left, Yuwen Yong had told him that Northern Qi would doubtlessly try every trick in the book to stop the Zhou-Chen alliance from happening. He’d said that Yan Wushi would head to the south with him, so as to protect him during the trip. Back then, Yuwen Qing had thought that the emperor was making a mountain out of a molehill. But, at the same time, few people could claim they’d had the honor of letting the Demon Lord protect him, so it greatly satisfied Yuwen Qing’s vanity. He’d done as asked and concealed Yan Wushi’s identity, hence outsiders only thought there was another beauty like Yu Zi in the carriage. Never had Yuwen Qing thought he’d have a brush with death, right then and there!

If he hadn’t concealed Yan Wushi’s presence, there was no way the enemy would have exposed themselves so quickly. They might have even tried more underhanded tactics, something more difficult to guard against. If his guardians could seize this opportunity and get rid of most of the attackers tonight, then the remaining journey to Chen would become a great deal safer. Yuwen Qing understood this very well.

But with the ring of clashing weapons outside and the scent of blood still filling his nostrils, Yuwen Qing felt like he was on the verge of

suffocation. Even Yan Wushi's presence couldn't calm him down completely.

Then, like he'd just thought of something, he sprang up and quickly pressed his finger beneath Yu Zi's nose. Only after some time did he release a sigh of relief, his entire body slumping inside the carriage.

Outside, the battled continued.

Yuwen Qing wasn't the only one who'd been frightened. The merchants who accompanied them were all huddled fearfully inside their carriages, too afraid to leave. Several attendants had thought their martial abilities sufficient and wanted to help—within several moments they were lying dead on the ground. They'd been unable to withstand a single strike. The attackers were brutal, ruthless, and they'd boldly left their faces uncovered. Some people hadn't managed to escape in time, their lives falling to the blades straight away.

Four elders from Hehuan Sect surrounded Yan Wushi. Though they outnumbered him, it was those four who seemed to be in trouble, their circumstances dire. A mere second later, their formation was in tatters and they appeared close to defeat. Though Yan Wushi was alone and surrounded, there was something ostentatious about him—a domineering presence that said he was more than their equal. Just that alone was enough to overpower them all.

On the other end, Xiao Se sent a person flying with a palm strike, but he was unwilling to approach Yan Wushi. Instead, he tried to move toward the carriage where Yuwen Qing was hiding. But he didn't forget to taunt Bai Rong as well: "Shimei, you truly can't do anything right, can you? You even managed to ruin a trivial task. How will Shizun entrust you with any missions ever again?"

Bai Rong was sitting in a tree on the sidelines. Arms crossed, she laughed. "Xiao-shixiong never told me that Sect Leader Yan was here too! If you're so capable, why don't you confront him properly yourself?"

Xiao Se gave a contemptuous snort but didn't answer. He sent a blast from his palm at the carriage, rupturing it on the spot and revealing Yuwen Qing's terrified face.

However, he was quickly frustrated as more fighters arrived. “Shizun asked us to assassinate one man, not show off and pick fights,” he yelled at Bai Rong. “Hurry up and help me while the elders are stalling Yan Wushi!”

The escorting experts weren’t a match for Xiao Se, but their superior numbers meant he couldn’t just ignore them. Between two parties of roughly equal abilities, one’s martial superiority didn’t lie in flashy moves or internal cultivation but rather their experience and technique. Every time Xiao Se defeated one combatant, another one emerged. Unable to take it any longer, his annoyance gave way to irascibility.

Yet Bai Rong was unmoved. “We talked about this before coming here! The Sect Leader only told me to watch for a chance to assassinate Yuwen Qing. It took me everything to escape from Sect Leader Yan—my chest *still* hurts. How could I possibly manage to help Xiao-shixiong in his fight?”

Xiao Se clenched his teeth in fury while “paying his respects” to all eighteen generations of Bai Rong’s ancestors along with her master, Sang Jingxing. But for now, there were people in his way, so he couldn’t spare the time to kill Yuwen Qing.

Xiao Se caught sight of Yuwen Qing dragging a beauty toward another carriage, her status unknown. Flames of rage burned hotter in his heart. He couldn’t take it anymore. Xiao Se used his full strength, quickly finishing off his enemies before charging after Yuwen Qing.

Yuwen Qing had already hidden himself in the carriage by then, but Xiao Se laughed coldly, thinking this man terribly stupid. Did he believe the carriage was wrought of indestructible iron? It would have been better to run off into the forest. Thinking this, he did the same as before and sent a palm strike at the carriage.

But this time, his attack was stopped entirely.

Or more precisely, a mighty surge of true qi flooded toward him, forcing him to retreat!

The blast of true qi blew the doors of the carriage open, revealing a pale, beautiful face.

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Chapter 38:
Sympathy and Tenderness

XIAO SE WOULD USUALLY try for a touch or a taste of someone this beautiful, but at the moment he couldn't even spare their face a thorough glance.

It was imperative that they assassinate Yuwen Qing tonight. Bai Rong had failed once—he couldn't fail the second attempt. Even though he knew that Yan Wushi's presence meant his chances were slim, he still had to risk it.

Xiao Se drew a folding fan from his waist. With a flick of his wrist, sharp blades were unsheathed over the fan's surface. He flung out his hand, and the fan swept through the air at his opponent, just as he leapt forward with a tap of his toes, striking out with a powerful palm blast for his second bout of attacks.

At first, Shen Qiao hadn't intended to take action. Each time he fought now meant he'd need even longer to recover later, and it might even deal irreparable damage to his foundations. Furthermore, Yan Wushi was there, so there should have been no need for him to fight. But at that moment, with Yuwen Qing dragging Yu Zi as he ran into Shen Qiao's carriage in a bid for help, all with the enemy mere inches away, closing in with the intent to kill, it was impossible for Shen Qiao to stand by any longer.

Given Yan Wushi's style, Xiao Se hadn't expected him to bring backup, so Xiao Se didn't suspect that someone else would be concealed inside the carriage—someone who shouldn't be underestimated. Recalling the latest rumors circulating through the jianghu, he matched them to the man before him and immediately gleaned his identity. "Sect Leader Shen, as the mighty grandmaster of a Daoist sect, aren't you ashamed to be reduced to this—serving Yan Wushi?"

He gave a sneering chuckle, but his moves came faster and faster, the blasts from his palms surging like the rising tide. It crashed forth wave after wave, leaving his opponent without a second to breathe. His fan seemed to

have a mind of its own—it worked in tandem with Xiao Se's qi, filling whatever openings his attacks left, specifically seeking out the enemy's weak points. The result: an assault on two fronts. Anyone fighting him was forced to face a two-layered threat.

Shen Qiao didn't want to drag out the fight. He didn't bother with his bamboo cane—instead, he drew Shanhe Tongbei straight away.

The sword glares twined and wove into a shining curtain that cloaked the sky. They sliced right through the powerful palm blasts and even held the fan blades at bay. Xiao Se tried to break through, but discovered that the screen was like a flawless net—he couldn't find a single opening.

On top of that, Shen Qiao was turning Xiao Se's own attacks back onto him—the screen reflected his palm blasts, leaving him no space to breathe. When his defenses faltered just once, his chest took a heavy blow, and Xiao Se promptly hacked up a mouthful of blood.

Hadn't they said that Shen Qiao was gravely injured, that his martial arts were greatly diminished?!

Xiao Se was alarmed and enraged. He could tell there was no benefit to carrying on the fight—the four elders were totally unable to hold back Yan Wushi, and the moment he extricated himself, it would be Xiao Se's turn to suffer.

He just had to twist around and glance up into the tree again. Bai Rong, who'd been sitting there, was now nowhere to be found. At that, Xiao Se gritted his teeth. "Sect Leader Shen's reputation is well earned! This Xiao will return for another lesson at a later date!"

After saying so, he sent a palm strike at an opening. When Shen Qiao raised his sword to block, Xiao Se sheathed the blades of his fan, and without even a word to those elders, he vanished in the blink of an eye.

That moment was a vivid testament to the selfishness and callousness of the demonic sects.

Yuwen Qing crawled out from behind Shen Qiao, still trembling with fear. "My deepest thanks to this gentleman for his rescue. May I ask for his esteemed name?"

Shen Qiao returned his sword to its sheath. "It's Shen Qiao."

Yuwen Qing saw his vacant eyes and immediately understood. “So you are that…ahem, that Shen-gongzi!”

Word of the battle at the Su residence had spread like wildfire, along with Shen Qiao’s name. Whenever he was mentioned, Yan Wushi’s name inevitably followed, and in the end the conversation would conclude with suggestive smiles. Yuwen Qing had no connection to the jianghu and had only heard a bit of hearsay. Seeing the man himself today, he had to silently exclaim that Shen Qiao really was a beauty. He had a striking charm, despite his sickly air.

Especially striking when the beauty had drawn his sword and fought. In contrast to his frail appearance, he’d revealed swordplay so equanimous and assured that it was impossible to look away—truly a feast for the eyes. It was unfortunate that such a beauty was already spoken for. Yuwen Qing felt it truly a pity.

Shen Qiao did not know that Yuwen Qing was thinking any of this. He nodded at Yuwen Qing with a smile, using the same placid expression. “Would Senior Official Yuwen like to check on the Madam behind him now?”

“It seems she’s fainted,” said Yuwen Qing.

“Let me see.”

Yuwen Qing lifted Yu Zi’s hand for him.

Shen Qiao checked her pulse. “She’s fine. Her gate of sleep[13] was struck.”

He unblocked Yu Zi’s acupoint, and she slowly stirred to consciousness. The sight of Yuwen Qing and Shen Qiao right in front of her gave her another fright. Clearly, she was still rattled.

Yuwen Qing quickly held her down. “Everything’s fine now. Junior Preceptor Yan and Shen-gongzi saved us!”

“Xiao-Lin,” said Yu Zi. “She, she…”

“Someone from Hehuan Sect disguised themselves as Xiao-Lin to get close to you,” said Yuwen Qing. “They wanted to assassinate me by using you, so I fear Xiao-Lin may have already met a grim fate.”

“That might not be the case,” Shen Qiao interjected. “Since the Madam is fine, it’s possible her maid is as well. I ask Senior Official Yuwen to have his men conduct a search. Perhaps they’ll discover something.”

Yu Zi tugged at Yuwen Qing’s sleeve, her eyes brimming with tears. “Xiao-Lin has accompanied this concubine for a long time. She’s always been so loyal to me. Master, please send someone to look for her!”

Yuwen Qing melted. “Of course, I’ll tell someone to look right away!”

Elsewhere, the four Hehuan elders had finally lost to Yan Wushi. One had been killed on the spot. Another was gravely wounded—as he fled, Yan Wushi dealt him another critical blow. Barring a miracle, he wouldn’t live much longer. The remaining two were injured as well, and it took everything they had just to escape.

Yuwen Qing turned his head to look at Shen Qiao, sitting there holding his sword, his eyes lifeless. A swell of tender pity arose in him at the sight, and he completely forgot about Shen Qiao’s earlier heroic display of martial force.

“Is Shen-gongzi tired?” he asked. “You can rest in my carriage—there’s some food there as well.”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “No need to trouble yourself, Senior Official Yuwen.”

Yuwen Qing laughed. “It’s no trouble at all. You saved my life just now; I can’t thank you enough. Your complexion is a bit pale—you must be suffering from blood-qi deficiency. I brought some gelatin pastries for the trip and will send them to you later. Take one slice a day to replenish your blood. They’re sweet and go down easy…”

Shen Qiao silently pressed a hand to his forehead.

Yuwen Qing thought he was feeling dizzy and reached out to support him. But then he heard Yan Wushi’s languid voice drift over: “I was fighting a bloody battle out there, and now I see my A-Qiao about to be seduced away! How perfectly agonizing!”

Shen Qiao didn’t comment.

He didn’t even need to look to know that Yan Wushi’s clothes had not a drop of blood on them, let alone the remains of a “bloody battle.”

But Yan Wushi’s unconvincing act actually elicited some embarrassed guilt from Yuwen Qing. He quickly withdrew his hand. “The Junior Preceptor jests. I only saw that Shen-gongzi seemed a little fatigued. I’m deeply grateful to the Junior Preceptor for tonight! I dare not imagine what would have happened otherwise!”

Outside the carriage, their surroundings were in an uproar. Not only had Yuwen Qing’s men been injured, many of the merchants accompanying them had been caught in the disaster too. Yuwen Qing was the enemy’s only target, but the demonic sects never let morality get in the way of their attacks—only their whims mattered. Any time there was someone in their way, they’d kill them. The merchants had thought that traveling with an official would be safer, but instead they were met with catastrophe. Deep in helplessness and grief, they busied themselves with consoling their fellow merchants, creating a second commotion.

Yuwen Qing followed Shen Qiao’s suggestion and sent his men out to search. Sure enough, they found Yu Zi’s young maid by a rock next to a nearby creek. When the girl had gone outside to relieve herself, she’d walked some distance away to avoid being seen but was then suddenly knocked out. Upon waking up, she had no idea what had transpired.

Wherever Yan Wushi went, an invisible, crushing pressure followed. The entire procession slept not a wink that night, surrounded by a ceaseless clamor. Only the area around the carriage where Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao were staying was cast in an eerie silence. Yuwen Qing left the carriage with Yu Zi, then had someone bring them food to show his thanks. It wasn’t very convenient to cook outdoors, but Yuwen Qing had brought some jerky and candied preserves along on the trip. There were even fresh melons—he was obviously a man who indulged in pleasures.

Shen Qiao had no interest in the jerky, but he did partake in quite a few of the preserves. No matter where he went, his sweet tooth never changed.

Yan Wushi leaned against a cushion and popped a piece of jerky into his mouth, then chewed languidly. A freshly boiled pot of honey tea from

Ruru sat beside him. The scene cut a stark contrast between the clamor outside and the silence inside.

“The assassination failed this time,” said Shen Qiao, “but there might be a second attempt. There are too many openings around Senior Official Yuwen—I fear protecting him will be difficult.”

“That won’t be a problem,” said Yan Wushi. “He has a food taster to test for poison. This happened due to his own foolishness: he insisted on bringing a woman with him, and that was exploited. From now on, he’ll be much more careful. Besides, even if he does die, it doesn’t matter. I have another copy of the letter—when the time comes, the deputy envoy can present that to the Emperor of Chen instead. Still, Yuwen Qing does have quite the silver tongue, and he’s a fantastic speaker—few could replace him. That’s why the Emperor of Zhou values him so highly.”

Shen Qiao recalled Yuwen Qing’s breathless stream of words just a moment ago. Involuntarily, his lips tugged into the hint of a smile.

Yan Wushi sighed. “My A-Qiao truly is loved by all. Yuwen Qing is lascivious, so he goes without saying, but even that demoness Bai Rong has developed a soft spot for you! I’m forced to watch you carefully in fear that you might vanish at any time!”

Shen Qiao wrinkled his brow. “Don’t speak nonsense, Sect Leader Yan. Since when did I have anything going on with Bai Rong?”

“She disguised herself as that young maid to kill Yuwen Qing,” said Yan Wushi. “In the past, there was no way that the maid or Yuwen Qing’s concubine would have survived. But this time, she showed mercy to them both. Do you think it was because of Yuwen Qing? Or because of you? Sharp as she is, she’d likely already guessed you were here and wanted to leave a good impression on you, lest you despise her more, no?”

Then he clicked his tongue twice. “How difficult life must be for my A-Qiao! Born a numbskull, he spent his entire life with his head empty of anything other than morals and cultivation. He knows nothing about the love between men and women! If my venerable self hadn’t enlightened him, I fear he’d never have understood!”

With Yan Wushi, it was always “my A-Qiao,” as if Shen Qiao were something that belonged to him. Shen Qiao had refuted him a couple of

times, to little effect. By now he was numb to it, and let him do as he pleased.

“But what a pity,” Yan Wushi went on. “Her love is doomed to die before it’s ever born. If Sang Jingxing discovers her feelings, how would he torture her, I wonder?”

Shen Qiao was bewildered. “Does Hehuan Sect forbid their disciples from falling in love?”

Yan Wushi burst out laughing. “Do you truly not know? Hehuan Sect is famous for their parasitic cultivation. Everyone in the sect, whether man or woman, practices pair cultivation.[14] As far as this venerable one can tell, Bai Rong is no longer a virgin. I trust that her primordial Yin has already been plucked by her master, Sang Jingxing!”

Astonishment filled Shen Qiao’s face. It was a long time before he said, “But he’s her master…”

“So what if he is? Do you really think someone like Sang Jingxing, who pays no mind to gender and has a special love of virgins, would let another man claim his beautiful disciple’s primordial Yin? I don’t know how many men Bai Rong has pair cultivated with, but Sang Jingxing is certainly one of them.”

Shen Qiao frowned and didn’t speak.

Yan Wushi laughed. “Here’s A-Qiao’s bad habit again—feeling all sorry and tender toward the weak! Sang Jingxing aside, if Bai Rong truly didn’t want to pair cultivate with her sect members, she could have found a way to avoid it. But look at the speed of her martial progress—that’s all from parasitic cultivation, and she must have done it of her own free will. And still, you feel sorry for her? What about that woman is worth your sympathy? If you want to feel sorry for someone, why not feel sorry for me?”

Shen Qiao was dumbfounded. “Bai Rong isn’t worth my sympathy, but Sect Leader Yan is?”

“I fought one-on-four tonight—isn’t that worth some sympathy?”

He took Shen Qiao’s hand and placed it on his chest. “Look, my little heart is still thumping away even now!”

Right at this moment, Yuwen Qing's voice came from outside: "Junior Preceptor, Shen-gongzi, may I come in?"

Shen Qiao wanted to pull his hand back from Yan Wushi but was caught off guard when Yan Wushi yanked first, sending him toppling into the other man instead.

Yuwen Qing didn't hear anything, and took the silence as tacit consent. He opened the doors and lifted the curtains, and was greeted with this scene, which immediately struck him dumb.

Because from his point of view, it didn't look like Yan Wushi had meddled but rather like Shen Qiao threw himself into Yan Wushi's arms.

Seeing Yuwen Qing's dumbfounded expression, Yan Wushi raised an eyebrow. A mean-spiritedness surged within him. Without warning, he grabbed Shen Qiao's chin and forced a kiss upon him, right there.

For a moment, Shen Qiao was stunned. Then he promptly struck out with his palm, but Yan Wushi had been prepared—he neutralized the attack, tapping Shen Qiao's acupoints while he was at it. He gathered the utterly incapacitated Shen Qiao into his arms and lowered his head, pried open his lips, and forced him to accept the invasion.

"Mm…" Shen Qiao furrowed his brows hard. Not because he'd lost himself to bliss but from the torment of his restricted acupoints that kept him from struggling. Even with his good-natured personality, by now he was boiling with rage. Unfortunately, he wasn't Yan Wushi's match in martial arts, so all he could do was give Yan Wushi free rein. His slender neck was forced back while an arm remained relentlessly clamped around his waist. His jaw was sore, and it feebly slid closed as a thread of silver dribbled from the corner of his lips. But the man ravaging him paid no heed to any of this—he deepened the kiss further.

Yuwen Qing couldn't take his eyes off the arresting, erotic scene before him. His mouth had even gone a little dry.

Finally, Yan Wushi relaxed his arms and turned to look at Yuwen Qing. “Not done looking yet?” he asked.

Yuwen Qing boasted of himself as a romantic man—he was a well-versed veteran with copious experience. But right now, whether it was because he’d seen something he shouldn’t have, or because Yan Wushi was simply too intimidating, he stammered and fumbled through his words.

“I’m—I’m done…”

“Then why haven’t you gotten lost already?”

Yuwen Qing was struck speechless.

Then he really did get lost, stumbling head over heels like his soul was about to leap out of his body.

Yan Wushi looked back at Shen Qiao. For a moment, he was speechless himself. For Shen Qiao was already unconscious.

Probably not from being kissed dizzy—rather, it was the combination of being unable to fight back and temporary suffocation. Basically, he’d passed out from rage.

Yan Wushi had never seen anything like it, and a laugh escaped him. He also threw in a few clicks of his tongue to express his sympathy. “Poor thing!”

He didn’t think he’d gone overboard. Instead, he felt that Qi Fengge’s disciples were no fun at all.

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Chapter 39:
Meeting Beneath the Moonlight

IT HAD BEEN HUNDREDS OF YEARS since Eastern Wu had established their capital in Jiankang. During that time, Eastern Jin had migrated south and used the Yangtze River as a barrier to isolate themselves from the military chaos of the north. And so Jiankang became the most prosperous city, not only in the Central Plains but in all the land. Merchants from all over gathered there, while travelers and wanderers came and went like weaving shuttles. In the daytime, horses flooded the streets in endless streams, and when night fell, the city transformed into a sea of lanterns that shone all through to the dawn. The brothels were even livelier—their incense cages and gilded rooms were sleepless all night long.

Cities like Chang'an and Yecheng were also capitals, but the toll they'd taken suffering through extensive warfare was evident. Everyone favored the comparatively peaceful Jiangnan, which saw little fighting. It was seen as such a paradise that there was even a saying that "all the land's flowers gather in Jiankang." The officials of Northern Zhou, such as Yuwen Qing, might not say so out loud, but in their hearts, they all greatly admired Jiankang. The attendants accompanying them had no need to hide their feelings—they were already gasping in awe. This greatly flattered the officials of Chen who'd come out to receive them, and who couldn't resist pointing out the city's various vistas along the way.

Once inside the city, Yuwen Qing's party naturally stayed at the guest complex Chen provided for them. Yan Wushi was put up there as well, on the basis of his official position and because he'd been their savior. Yuwen Qing willingly ceded the main courtyard, moving into the side yard to fret over his concubine, Yu Zi. Since the scare that night, she'd fallen ill and become bedridden, then remained that way. Only after they'd settled themselves in the city did she begin to recover.

After the failed assassination, Hehuan Sect had showed no signs of movement. At first, Yuwen Qing was still in a state of apprehension, but then he considered Yan Wushi. If the assassins succeeded while Yan Wushi

was around, his reputation as the Huanyue Sect Leader would be in ruins. And in the jianghu, one's pride was worth more than their life. With this in mind, Yuwen Qing gradually relaxed and took his beloved concubine to tour Jiankang while he waited for the summons from the Emperor of Chen.

One day, while Shen Qiao was listening to the maid read a book to him in his room, someone came to report that Yuwen Qing was there to visit.

At Shen Qiao's nod, Ruru put down the book and opened the door.

Yuwen Qing entered and looked around. "Oh? Junior Preceptor Yan isn't here?"

Shen Qiao laughed. "The two of us have always roomed separately. If Senior Official Yuwen wishes to see him, you've come to the wrong room. However, I've heard that Sect Leader Yan has business today—he left early this morning."

Yuwen Qing chuckled dryly. "Excellent, excellent. His esteemed self is too frightening. Every time I talk to him, I'm more nervous than I am with His Majesty!"

Ruru couldn't keep a giggle from escaping.

Yuwen Qing had always been the type to indulge beauties. When he heard her laugh, he didn't grow angry but smiled at her instead.

This made Ruru feel a little embarrassed.

Yuwen Qing turned his smile to Shen Qiao. "With the weather so fine, would Shen-gongzi like to go for a stroll outside? Jiankang sits on the banks of the Huai River, and I heard that many ferry crossings dot it, each with its own market. Why not go out for a look around and purchase some fresh river delicacies along the way? Then we can have the complex prepare a feast for us tonight!"

After this, he seemed to think of something else. "But then, you do come from a Daoist background. Might you be required to abstain from meat and eat only vegetarian foods?"

"No, no such thing," said Shen Qiao. "I only fear that my poor eyesight might be a burden on your outing."

Yuwen Qing laughed. “Shen-gongzi saved my *life*! I was a burden to you then, so there’s no need to be so modest.”

Shen Qiao didn’t refuse him a second time. “Then I shall be so rude as to accept.”

The guest complex wasn’t far from one of the crossings, so Yuwen Qing declined to take a carriage. Instead, he brought Yu Zi and the others along for an outing on foot. At first, he was even worried that it might be inconvenient for Shen Qiao, but although Shen Qiao had to use a bamboo cane for support, he was no slower than the rest of them and didn’t require anyone’s assistance. He walked abreast with Yuwen Qing, no different from anyone else.

Yuwen Qing realized that Shen Qiao carried no sword. “Shen-gongzi, where is your sword?”

As if deducing the source of his concern, Shen Qiao smiled and said, “Senior Official Yuwen need not worry. If we encounter the enemy, my bamboo cane will serve well enough to fend off a few of them. Furthermore, this is still Jiankang. With the Linchuan Academy keeping watch, Hehuan Sect won’t be so reckless and overconfident as to attack us here!”

Shen Qiao had seen right through his anxieties. Yuwen Qing’s face went red, embarrassed. “No wonder I felt that everything has been much more peaceful since we entered the city. The Junior Preceptor was even confident enough to leave and take care of business. And that is why.”

“Chen and Zhou are allied to each other now,” Shen Qiao explained. “If you fell to assassins inside Jiankang, then forget discussing the alliance, Chen wouldn’t even be able to explain themselves to the Emperor of Zhou. So they will do their absolute best to ensure your safety. There are martial artists guarding the complex at all times—you just haven’t noticed.”

Yuwen Qing crept closer to him and whispered, “Shen-gongzi, I know you’re not the type to be a kept man, and I’d never dare to look down on you. The Junior Preceptor isn’t around today, so I’m taking a chance and telling you the truth: do you know how those in Chang’an see you?”

Shen Qiao smiled but didn’t speak.

Yuwen Qing thought that meant he didn't know and so tactfully told him, "They call you a dragon trapped in the shallows, forced to depend on Sect Leader Yan. They think that to protect yourself, you…*ahem*, that you cast aside your morals and integrity. But I've traveled with you and you saved my life, so of course I know the truth is nothing of the sort. But it's like how the saying goes, 'Rumors can twist even metal!' If you're able, I suggest you stay away from Junior Preceptor Yan. Why let others smear and humiliate you for no reason? Even I grow angry hearing what they say!"

Shen Qiao knew Yuwen Qing was telling him this because of the scene he'd witnessed on the carriage the other day, but it wasn't something Shen Qiao could succinctly explain. He could only say, "I'm deeply grateful for your kindness, but you're mistaken. I don't have that kind of relationship with Sect Leader Yan, but because he is a little…erratic, his actions often surpass all expectations."

"I know, I know!" said Yuwen Qing. "Of course you're not a kept man who depends on Sect Leader Yan. I also hold no prejudice toward homosexuals, but given your circumstances now, if you and Junior Preceptor Yan, um, are in love with each other, I fear that the rumors and slander you encounter will only hurt you, not Junior Preceptor Yan!"

Shen Qiao was at a loss. "…We're not in love with each other, and I'm not a homosexual either."

"I know, I know!" said Yuwen Qing. "It's not something you can say out loud. We share a silent understanding, so it's fine!"

Shen Qiao lost the will to speak. Whatever Yuwen Qing said after that, he let it flow in one ear and out the other.

The ferry crossing was a hubbub of shouting and chatter. A great variety of goods were scattered about, and there were quite a few people like Yuwen Qing—those on foot who'd come to browse and shop. Others were in carriages or on horseback, and yet more were calling out farewells to family from the riverbank or from docking ships. Quite suddenly, everyone was shoulder to shoulder as carriages and horses streamed like the river itself, on the verge of trampling each other.

Then a horse charged toward them from behind—perhaps it had been spooked or its owner had driven it poorly. In a bid to dodge, their party was forced to scatter in different directions, and Shen Qiao became separated

from the others. However, he wasn't worried, as Yuwen Qing had multiple men around to protect him. Slowly, he walked back toward the market, following the riverside stalls. Now and then he heard the peddlers hawking things he was interested in, and he stopped to inspect their wares. Though his poor eyesight was obvious to the peddlers, his clothing and bearing were completely unlike those of a beggar, so they didn't dare treat him with contempt. Rather, they enthusiastically talked up their merchandise to him.

"Sir, please take a look at what I have. These are all woven from the finest bamboo strips. Baskets, chairs, I have it all! And here are some little knick-knacks—you can bring them home for your daughter or son to play with!" When he saw Shen Qiao crouch, he picked up a bamboo ball and thrust it into his hands. "Here, feel one. It's very smooth, no splinters at all!"

"It is indeed very smooth." Shen Qiao stroked it while smiling. "I'll take one, then."

From beside him came the sweet voice of a child. "Uncle, Uncle, my brother broke my little bamboo chick, so Father told me to come and buy another!"

The peddler must have known the girl's parents. "Your little brother was being naughty again? But I don't have any bamboo chicks left. The one you bought before was the last. It takes a long time to weave one, and Uncle is busy right now, so I'll weave one for you in a couple of days!"

"Then I'll help Uncle out here!" said the little girl. "That way, Uncle can finish selling faster. Could you weave me a chick sooner, then?"

The peddler burst out laughing. "What can you help me with? Hurry on home, or your parents will worry when they can't find you!"

"Oh." Filled with disappointment, the little girl seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Abruptly, Shen Qiao said, "Do you still have bamboo strips?"

The peddler was puzzled. "I do. Does this gentleman want to purchase bamboo strips?"

"Mm. I want to make something with your bamboo strips, then pay whatever I owe you. May I?"

The peddler laughed. “This gentleman is too modest! Of course you can!”

He picked up a handful of bamboo strips and gave them to Shen Qiao. “But can you really weave something, what with your eyes?”

Shen Qiao laughed as well. “I weaved some when I was young, for my younger sister and brothers, so they wouldn’t be bored. I still remember a little.”

He said “a little,” but his hands moved swiftly. With nimble fingers, he tied a knot in the bamboo, wrapped one end around the other, and then inserted it into a tucked-away slot he’d already woven. In the blink of an eye, a little chick had come to life.

The little girl was surprised and overjoyed. “A chick, a chick!”

Shen Qiao handed it to her. “I don’t know how your last one looked,” he said with a smile, “so I just wove one at random. It might not be as pretty.”

“It’s pretty! Very pretty! Thank you, Big Brother! You’re the best!”

Off to the side, the peddler said a little sourly, “I’m not that much older than this gentleman, but you call him Big Brother while calling me Uncle!”

Shen Qiao laughed out loud.

The little girl ran off, skipping and prancing. Shen Qiao’s legs were somewhat numb from all the crouching, so he stood, then paid the peddler for the bamboo strips and ball. The peddler declined his money, but Shen Qiao insisted, forcing the coins into the other man’s hands. “May I ask which direction the guest complex for foreign envoys is in?”

“Are you a foreign envoy who’s come to Chen, sir?” Understanding dawned on the peddler, and he continued, “The complex isn’t far from here, but with all the crowds, you won’t be able to find it with your eyes. I’ll take your esteemed self there!”

Shen Qiao was grateful but asked, “What about your stall…?”

The peddler laughed. “No need to worry! I come here to sell bamboo wares every day, and they’re nothing valuable. Plus, the stall owners here

all know each other—I'll just ask them to keep an eye on things. How could I allow a guest from afar like yourself to get lost!"

He led Shen Qiao back along the ferry crossing. "The main roads are full of people, so it's easy to get lost. Taking the alleyways is faster here!"

The peddler chuckled and supported Shen Qiao's arm to guide him. "If this gentleman is staying here a few more days, he ought to take a couple more strolls through the city. Most of the food in the south is quite wonderful and painstakingly prepared. Once you start eating them, I'm sure you'll…"

Something whistled through the air, so small it was easy to miss. The peddler hadn't noticed and kept talking, but Shen Qiao's expression shifted minutely. With a sweep of his cane, he knocked the tiny needle off-course and into a wall.

At the same time, the peddler's voice came to an abrupt stop and he fell limply to the ground.

The person who'd ambushed Shen Qiao had also attacked the peddler. Shen Qiao couldn't reach everywhere at once—he'd blocked the needle that came at him but had no time to do the same for the peddler. He'd acted a little too late.

"And which friend is this? Why must you hide yourself so?" He crouched down to check on the peddler's condition and was somewhat relieved to see that the man was only unconscious.

"Shen-lang is so gentle and kind, even to a bamboo-seller, so why is he so mean to me?"

A sweet fragrance wafted over to him, along with a voice so honeyed that it dripped.

A small frown settled over Shen Qiao's features. "Bai Rong?"

She was sitting happily atop a wall, her legs crossed at the ankles as she swung them back and forth. In her hand was a peony that she must have picked from somewhere.

"It's been a while!" she said.

"Didn't we just meet when you tried to assassinate Yuwen Qing in the middle of the night?"

“Don’t you know the saying ‘one day apart feels like three autumns’?” said Bai Rong. “So many autumns have passed already!”

Whether the speaker was Yan Wushi or Bai Rong, Shen Qiao could never adapt to such a borderline-flirtatious manner of speech. All he could do was remain silent.

Bai Rong rolled her eyes, then tossed him the flower she held. “Here, catch!”

Shen Qiao caught it by reflex. He’d thought it was a disguised weapon of some sort, but a touch told him it was a flower. The realization startled him.

When she saw his expression, Bai Rong grew even more gleeful. “You thought I threw some kind of hidden weapon at you? Do you really think me so devious?”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “That’s not it.”

“What isn’t it?” asked Bai Rong.

“When you tried to kill Yuwen Qing, his concubine and her maid had no chance of escape, yet you didn’t kill them. That proves that you aren’t an indiscriminate murderer with no moral standards. On their behalf, I ought to thank you for the mercy you showed.”

Bai Rong blinked. “How do you know I showed them mercy? Maybe I was just too lazy to do more.”

Shen Qiao smiled but didn’t argue with her.

Bai Rong sighed. “You’re so handsome when you smile! You really should smile more. It makes me very happy that you think so well of me—will you let me kiss you?”

Right after she spoke, she moved.

Shen Qiao thought she really was about to kiss him. He reflexively backed up three steps, only to realize that she was still sitting atop the wall. She’d only been teasing him.

Bai Rong laughed so hard she almost tumbled right off the wall. “Shen-lang, why are you so cute? I just keep liking you more and more!”

“There must be a reason you came to find me, isn’t there?” asked Shen Qiao.

“What, I can’t come looking for you without one?” Bai Rong said, all smiles. “All right, there’s no reason not to tell you. I’ve been following you from afar, hoping to find the chance to poison you, knock you out, and drag you away. Unfortunately, you’re far too alert, so I could never give it a go until just now. I went through so much difficulty just to talk to you.”

Her words mixed truths and lies, half-sincere and half-facetious. Shen Qiao didn’t know whether or not to believe her. He stayed silent and kept his guard up.

“The chick you wove for that little girl was so pretty,” Bai Rong added. “Can you make one for me too?”

Shen Qiao was taken aback, then shook his head. “I don’t have any bamboo strips with me.”

After thinking for a while, he tossed her the bamboo ball in his hand. “Here, you can play with this ball instead.”

A giggle burst out of Bai Rong. “Are you coaxing me like a child?”

Although she’d objected, she quickly grabbed the ball and began tossing it up and down in her palm.

“Has little Bai-niangzi ever thought about leaving Hehuan Sect?” asked Shen Qiao.

“Why suddenly ask…” Bai Rong said curiously.

Halfway through her sentence, her expression turned altogether severe, though her tone remained flippant. “Sect Leader Shen must have heard something from Sect Leader Yan, and now he thinks our Hehuan Sect filthy and foul. Are we undeserving of speaking with you, the lofty sect leader of Xuandu Mountain?”

Murderous intent was pouring from her by the time she finished, as if she would attack if she found Shen Qiao’s answer unacceptable.

“No,” said Shen Qiao.

Bai Rong’s expressions changed faster than the flip of a page. In an instant, she once again wore a smile as lovely as a flower. “Or did you want

to call Hehuan Sect deplorable? To say that our men and women pair cultivate without concern for rank and seniority? And you're telling me to change sides and correct my ways?"

Shen Qiao frowned. "I only feel that you might not like staying there."

"Hehuan Sect is the place I grew up. If I don't stay there, where can I go? To Huanyue Sect? Or to Fajing Sect? Is murder better than pair cultivation in your eyes? Everyone calls Hehuan Sect a demonic sect, but isn't Huanyue Sect one as well? Don't forget that Yan Wushi has far more blood on his hands than I do! And if you're talking about those prestigious, righteous sects that claim they're so virtuous—if you were still the leader of Xuandu Mountain, would you be willing to accept me? And even if you were, what about everyone else on Xuandu Mountain?"

Shen Qiao was left a little astounded by her long string of questions. "Yes, you're right," he said with a sigh. "I misspoke."

He hadn't put that much thought into his question. He only felt that Bai Rong was different from someone like Huo Xijing, and that it was a pity for her to remain in Hehuan Sect.

Bai Rong's tone was honey-sweet. "I know that Shen-lang thinks I've been suffering in Hehuan Sect. From the moment you were willing to help even a horse, I realized that you were a gentle, kindhearted person. Good people like you are rare! This one will treasure these feelings of yours, but she has her own plans, so you need not worry about her!

"I'll tell you another secret." She suddenly jumped from the wall and floated to Shen Qiao, reaching out to tug on his sleeve. Though Shen Qiao quickly evaded, it didn't ruin her good mood—a trace of cunning shone through instead. "You'll reap nothing good if you stay with Yan Wushi," she said, "for a disaster will soon descend. To avoid becoming collateral damage, you should hurry up and put some distance…"

She hadn't yet finished her sentence when her expression changed, but it wasn't due to Shen Qiao. She stared straight ahead, far into the distance, before bursting out, "This one has important matters to attend to, so Shen-lang need not see her off!" Then she was gone, vanished without a trace—she must have used every iota of her qinggong.

At first, Shen Qiao assumed it was Yan Wushi’s arrival that had forced her to beat a hasty retreat, but in the next moment, he realized that was wrong.

The newcomer wasn’t Yan Wushi.

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Chapter 40:
Two Grandmasters

ACROSS THE STREET FROM HIM, the clamor of cries from buyers and sellers receded like the ebbing tide until he could no longer hear anything.

Shen Qiao didn't need to open his eyes to know that he was still standing in the same place, that he hadn't switched locations all of a sudden.

But around him, faintly felt, was an invisible force, and its incessant interference whispered to him, trying to impart upon him the false perception that he was somewhere else.

It was a profoundly enigmatic experience. When one's internal energy grew powerful enough, they could influence the ambiance of their surroundings, disorienting others and confusing their senses.

Obviously, they'd chosen to announce their presence like this in order to put psychological pressure on Shen Qiao. But he sensed no hostility from them, so he didn't move.

There came the delicate tinkling of jade pendants. At times, the sound seemed distant, as if drifting in from five kilometers over, and at other times near, as if only a few steps away. It reached him from all directions, omnipresent and pervasive, clung to him like a shadow to its master, or rot to a bone.

The sound of jade striking jade was crisp and musical, but even such a lovely sound, given enough time, would unsettle and disturb its listeners. Shen Qiao clutched his bamboo cane and remained motionless, his head lowered and eyes closed, as if he'd fallen asleep.

Then, without warning, he moved.

His cane thrust forward with lightning speed, too swift to parry.

His body swept forward with the thrust, like an arrow springing from a bow, cutting a figure completely different from his normal, sickly one.

Like a leopard that had spotted its chance, he pounced at his target with unerring precision.

The bamboo cane seemed to lunge at empty space. There was clearly nothing there, but when the cane, charged with internal energy and transformed into an arc of light, struck that point, an invisible barrier around the area shattered and collapsed, and the noise that had been cut off came cascading back, all at once.

“And which esteemed master is this? Why not show yourself?” said Shen Qiao.

“I have waited a long time at Linchuan Academy for an honored guest, but he never appeared. So I had to come here and personally invite him myself. Please forgive my rudeness just now.” The voice, warm and kindly, approached from afar.

The person in question didn’t try to conceal the sound of their footfalls. They came step by step, clear as a bell, and each one sounded brightly, ringing right against Shen Qiao’s heart.

Shen Qiao knew that this was the result of internal energy combined with an illusory technique. Just like how they’d muted all the noise, this, too, was meant to intimidate him from the start.

“So, it was Academy Master Ruyan,” he said. “I’ve heard a lot about you. This humble Daoist is fortunate to finally meet you today.”

He was the head of the Confucian sects, as well as one of the top three martial artists in the world, and so Ruyan Kehui’s reputation resounded throughout the land. But his dress was very simple: cloth robes and shoes, his hair also bound with a cloth ribbon. His appearance was plain and unassuming as well—in a crowd, he’d look like any other ordinary, middle-aged man. He wouldn’t draw any attention at all.

But at this moment, walking across the street, his pace even, languid, and full of confidence, no one could doubt his identity.

For very few people in the world had bearing as magnificent as his.

“When word of the Daoist Grandmaster Qi’s departure arrived, I was also in secluded cultivation and unable to send my condolences. Only after I left seclusion did I hear the shocking news. Sect Leader Qi was a man of

great talent, his martial arts peerless. The entire world admired him, and his sudden passing was truly unexpected. My heart was filled with sorrow and regret beyond words. I hope that Daoist Master Shen did not lose himself to grief."

It was only natural that a martial artist on par with Ruyan Kehui would develop a sense of kinship with Qi Fengge—a kind of bond between martial experts. His words weren't simply overdone flattery but almost certainly sincere.

Shen Qiao courteously cupped his hands at him. "On behalf of my master, this humble Daoist thanks Academy Master Ruyan for your kindness. My master once said that though the age he'd lived to might not be very old for Xiantian experts, he felt that if he could die in his pursuit of the ultimate martial arts, that would be well worth it. So please, I ask Academy Master Ruyan to not grieve too much for my late master, for 'we do not walk our Dao alone, but as one with heaven and earth.'"

Ruyan Kehui sighed. "What a wonderful saying, 'we do not walk our Dao alone, but as one with heaven and earth.' Daoist Grandmaster Qi truly was an extraordinary man!" He gazed at Shen Qiao. "When I left, the tea house was boiling some water. I trust that by now the tea is ready. Would Daoist Master Shen be interested in a tour of Linchuan Academy?"

"This humble Daoist has been in the north for too long," said Shen Qiao. "I'm afraid that I haven't yet grown accustomed to southern tea."

Few people in all the land could dream of receiving a personal invitation from Ruyan Kehui—to most, it would have been an incomparable honor. Yet Shen Qiao politely refused.

Ruyan Kehui smiled minutely and didn't grow angry. "Southern tea has its own wonderful charm. It's open and all-encompassing, like a boundless sea that accepts the waters of a hundred rivers."

Shen Qiao, too, smiled. "I only fear that I will be unable to return the courtesy. It would be terribly rude to refuse Academy Master Ruyan's requests after drinking your tea. It'd create a ruinous dilemma."

"The northern kingdoms are vast and abundant, but the southern kingdom is no less so. Once he's tasted Linchuan Academy's tea, perhaps

this honored guest will find it unbearable to leave, even without his host imploring him to stay?”

With a claim like that, did the Linchuan Academy drug all their visitors, and that’s why they couldn’t bear to leave? Shen Qiao couldn’t help it and burst out with a chuckle.

“What is Daoist Master Shen laughing about?” asked Ruyan Kehui curiously. “Do you find my words laughable?”

Shen Qiao waved his hand. “I apologize for my sudden lack of manners. It has nothing to do with the Academy Master—I ask your forgiveness.”

If Yan Wushi were there, he would have spoken his mind, taunting, but obviously, that wasn’t Shen Qiao’s style.

Until today, Ruyan Kehui had never imagined that Shen Qiao would be so stubborn. Logically speaking, a former sect leader who’d lost his position would never cozy up to someone from the demonic sects, regardless of his reasons. Rumor had it that Yan Wushi saved Shen Qiao’s life and used that to extort him into staying, and that Shen Qiao relied on Yan Wushi for protection. Ruyan Kehui hadn’t believed such unfounded hearsay. But Shen Qiao’s behavior was beginning to force him to reconsider.

“I had the fortune of meeting the Daoist Grandmaster Qi once before his passing,” Ruyan Kehui said. “We only conversed for a few days, yet I felt as if we were old friends. I invited your master to join me in supporting an enlightened ruler, in order to return peace and prosperity to the common folk throughout the land. Your master was unwilling to involve Xuandu Mountain in secular affairs, but he supported the idea of proper dynastic succession. That’s why he established that twenty-year covenant with Hulugu. Even though Daoist Master Shen is no longer the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain, you are still Daoist Grandmaster Qi’s disciple. Will you truly abandon your Master’s guiding principles and policies just like that?”

“Academy Master Ruyan is not quite right,” said Shen Qiao. “Leaving aside that my relationship with Sect Leader Yan is not what others think, Huanyue Sect supports the Zhou Dynasty, which flourishes more by the day and grants its people peace and comfort. Are you saying that just because Yuwen Yong is of the Xianbei people, he cannot rule the Central

Plains and unite the lands? My master opposed betraying the interests of the Central Plains people by colluding with foreign tribes. But if those same foreigners come to the Central Plains and learn our culture, if they treat themselves and the Han as one and the same, then why can't they be considered enlightened rulers?"

Ruyan Kehui shook his head, a touch of gravity coloring his tone. "No matter how much time passes, foreign barbarians will remain foreign barbarians. They won't change just by entering and settling down in the Central Plains. Look at Qi—the ancestors of the Gao family weren't even from the foreign tribes. But they've been immersed in the northern cultures for too long and have completely assimilated into them—now they lack even a trace of Han etiquette. The Lord of Qi is a capricious fool who allows scoundrels and women to destroy his imperial court. I fear that the Gao family's reign is nearing its end. Meanwhile, Zhou grew powerful due to the Göktürks—eventually they even sought connections through marriage, employing all kinds of tricks to please them. But surely Daoist Master Shen understands very well the danger the Göktürks pose to our Central Plains?"

In the end, Ruyan Kehui believed that the Emperor of Chen was an enlightened ruler who could unite the lands, and he hoped to persuade Shen Qiao to change sides and choose righteousness. His great sincerity was apparent—despite his rank and status, he'd come here personally. After all, strictly speaking, Shen Qiao had lost the position of sect leader, and his martial arts were far diminished compared to before. He could no longer match Ruyan Kehui in status, so there was no need for Ruyan Kehui to ask him in person. And yet here he was.

A few months ago, when Shen Qiao had just entered secular society and had little understanding of the ways of the world, such a speech might have moved him. But he'd formed his own opinions now. After listening, he only shook his head and spoke plainly. "At the moment, this humble Daoist represents no sect and is only a lone soul wandering the jianghu, trying to survive amidst the chaos. Whether I pledge my allegiance presents little significance to either Linchuan Academy or Chen. This humble Shen is infinitely grateful that, out of respect for my master, Academy Master Ruyan came to personally advise me today. But all I can do is appreciate your kindness within my heart."

Ruyan Kehui heaved a quiet sigh. “I can hear from Daoist Master Shen’s voice that you have a blockage, probably due to long-unhealed internal injuries. If you are willing to recuperate at Linchuan Academy, I can help treat your injuries together with the best doctors in Chen Palace!”

Shen Qiao had once heard Yan Wushi say that the current Empress of Zhou, Liu Jinyan, was Ruyan Kehui’s shimei, hence Ruyan Kehui was very close to the royal family of Chen. And now it appeared that was the truth: it was impossible for the average person to so casually make a promise on behalf of the royal physicians.

Still, Shen Qiao was a little moved that Ruyan Kehui would go as far as to make such an overture. “Many thanks to Academy Master Ruyan. This Shen is unworthy of this offer, as lacking in virtue and ability as he is. He dares not accept.”

Truthfully, Ruyan Kehui hadn’t for a moment imagined that his expedition today would be a futile exercise because Shen Qiao had no reason to reject him, neither logically nor emotionally.

All of a sudden, he recalled those preposterous rumors about Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao’s relationship, but he immediately rejected them as *so* preposterous, it was laughable. Simply impossible.

“Very well,” he said. “Linchuan Academy has never forced things on the unwilling.” On Ruyan Kehui’s face was a faint look of dismay.

Shen Qiao’s own expression was apologetic. “This humble Daoist is foolish and stubborn. Because of him, the Academy Master’s trip here was in vain.”

Ruyan Kehui smiled. “The guest complex isn’t far from here, but it will be difficult to locate for an outlander. The peddler with you has been knocked unconscious; shall I take you there on his behalf?”

“Academy Master Ruyan must be bored out of his mind with nothing to do! Instead of reminiscing with your shimei the empress, you came all the way here to convince A-Qiao to switch sides! Too bad A-Qiao is adamant about staying with me—how awfully disappointed you must be!”

These words, obviously, were not Shen Qiao’s.

From the street corner appeared a man, walking in their direction at an even pace.

Unlike the sounds of ringing jade that Ruyan Kehui had used to herald his arrival, Yan Wushi moved in absolute silence. His robes flapped and furled, yet he was as elegant and assured as ever, as if no one in the world could halt his steps, nor was worth a second of his attention.

It was an insolent arrogance, but a silent one.

Ruyan Kehui remained unruffled, and the hint of a smile even crept across his face. “Now that I think about it, Sect Leader Yan and I haven’t seen each other since your seclusion. I see today that your martial arts have indeed progressed by leaps and bounds—covering a thousand miles in a day.”

Yan Wushi stopped half a step behind Shen Qiao, advancing no further. He sized Ruyan Kehui up briefly, with narrowed eyes. “Yet you continue to spin in place and have barely improved in ten years.”

After that, the two of them spoke no further, only glowered at each other.

A passing observer, ignorant of the situation, would probably think they had some sort of strange, exceptionally intense relationship.

Yan Wushi’s robes fluttered despite the lack of wind while the hem of Ruyan Kehui’s robe moved nary an inch.

Suddenly, Shen Qiao said, “If the two of you want to fight, I beg you to do it elsewhere. There is an ordinary civilian here who knows nothing of martial arts, and he shouldn’t be harmed in the crossfire.”

He’d just spoken his last word when Ruyan Kehui moved.

But he didn’t move in Yan Wushi’s direction—rather, he swept off toward the outskirts of the city. His parting line drifted behind him. “There is open space outside the city!”

The words carried internal energy—Ruyan Kehui’s martial prowess was no joke. In an instant, his voice had reached half of Jiankang, astonishing everyone who heard it.

Yan Wushi gave a cold snort. Then, seemingly without moving a muscle, he streaked away as well.

Several silhouettes swept after him, right on his heels: all the martial artists who'd heard the commotion and were rushing to witness the battle.

For this was a battle that was bound to shake the very world.

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More than a few people had pricked up their ears at Ruyan Kehui's words. Every person in Jiankang who'd happened to hear him sat up in surprise and then hastened to follow. Even though they didn't know who Ruyan Kehui's opponent was, they knew it had to be someone extraordinary to have warranted a personal invitation.

Witnessing such a sensational duel was the opportunity of a lifetime. No one wanted to miss out.

However, following the combatants to the battlefield wasn't a simple matter. The moment Ruyan Kehui had spoken, he and Yan Wushi swept out toward the outskirts, one in the lead and one behind. They drifted gracefully, so swift that they only left twin afterimages in bystanders' eyes—and in another blink, even those silhouettes disappeared. Many people with inferior qinggong could do nothing but gape in the direction they'd gone, then stomp their feet or wring their hands in frustration.

Still, a fair number managed to keep up. For example, Liuhe Guild's leader Dou Yanshan had heard the commotion by sheer fortunate coincidence. He was following right behind them at the moment and was even able to call to Yan Wushi: "Sect Master Yan, do you remember the trouble you caused our Liuhe Guild that night in Chuyun Temple? Well, today this Dou wishes to challenge you too!"

Not many people in the world were worthy of Yan Wushi's attention, and Dou Yanshan definitely wasn't one of them.

Hence, the moment after Dou Yanshan had spoken, he heard Yan Wushi's sneering laugh. "I, Yan Wushi, do not fight with nameless juniors!"

He'd also channeled internal energy into his words, and they traveled far. Not only did Dou Yanshan hear it while he chased after them, but even

Shen Qiao, who hadn't moved from their original spot, heard him too. Without a doubt, so did others.

Many people laughed secretly in their hearts.

And the less virtuous ones laughed immediately, out loud.

Dou Yanshan's expression darkened.

Few in the jianghu had seen Dou Yanshan fight. After all, he was the leader of the largest guild in all the land and wielded great status and authority. His would be a terrible failure of a guild if they required him to personally take action on every little thing. Even so, and even if his skills didn't place him among the top ten, he was still a first-rate martial artist.

And yet, he'd been deemed unworthy of Yan Wushi's attention.

The sheer, imperious egotism of the man spoke volumes.

But Yan Wushi had both the qualifications and the strength, so what could anyone do? Other than Dou Yanshan, no one else found his words particularly inappropriate.

Dou Yanshan stayed in pursuit and shouted again. "Has Sect Leader Yan ever heard the saying that 'pride goes before a fall?'"

He channeled nine-tenths of his internal energy into this jab. Everyone nearby him was blasted by the shock waves, their ears buzzing, heads swimming, and nauseated.

They shuddered involuntarily. They didn't dare look down on Dou Yanshan anymore.

Shen Qiao didn't give chase.

He knew that any gap between Yan Wushi's and Ruyan Kehui's strength had to be minimal. When you were a martial artist of their level, victory or defeat lay not in the slight disparities between internal energy or moves but in the ability to understand their opponent and seize opportunities when they arose. A hair's breadth of difference was sometimes enough to overturn the outcome.

Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui knew this well. That's why they threw most of their strength into this fight, if not absolutely all of it. Given Shen

Qiao's current abilities, even catching up to them would be difficult. And making the attempt would cost him a great deal of true qi.

In any case, a duel between those two was sure to take a while. As long as he went in the direction everyone else had taken off in, he'd find the location eventually. He wasn't in a rush. First, he helped the peddler up and walked him to the end of the street before entrusting him to the care of the other stallkeepers. Then he headed for the city gates.

He'd just gone through them when he heard Bai Rong's laugh. "Walking like this, Shen-lang? So slow and plodding—how long will it take to get there?"

Shen Qiao raised an eyebrow. "Why hasn't little Bai-niangzi gone to watch the fight?"

Bai Rong pouted. "What are we, strangers? You keep calling me little Bai-niangzi, little Bai-niangzi! If you don't want to call me Rong-niang, you can at least call me Peony!"

When she saw Shen Qiao ignore her and carry on walking, she stomped her foot. "Fine, keep loafing around. Maybe you're not worried, but I'm worried for you! With such a rare battle, many people have put their all into chasing after them. If you get there too late, you won't be able to find a good spot!"

She reached out to grab Shen Qiao. He was about to flinch away when he heard her sweet cry. "Oh! I'm only taking you there, so why are you dodging! Don't tell me you're still afraid of my flirting?"

Shen Qiao was left speechless. In his moment of distraction, Bai Rong grabbed him.

Tucking his arm against her side, she applied her qinggong. She soared onward with him effortlessly, no slower than Dou Yanshan had been, like the powerful movements of a swimming dragon.

Still, getting a lift from somebody else was much more convenient than walking by yourself, so Shen Qiao expressed his gratitude. Bai Rong giggled. "'Thank-yous' are so cold! If you want to thank me, how about letting me sleep with you for a night? Yan Wushi hasn't slept with you yet, right? Your body, full of primordial Yang, is the absolute best gift I could receive. Yes, your martial arts have suffered some damage, but I'm not

picky! I'll teach you how to pair cultivate—perhaps there's even hope you'll recover your strength! No need to practice with that nuisance of a *Zhuyang Strategy* anymore!"

Shen Qiao did not deign to reply.

Still, Bai Rong earnestly went on trying to persuade him. "How about it? It's a deal that benefits us both! I'll gain something, and you won't lose anything! Why not think it over, Shen-lang?"

"…No need," said Shen Qiao. "Thank you for your kindness."

Bai Rong pouted but relented.

"Who do you think will win and lose in today's battle?" she asked after a while.

It was an excellent question.

The people who'd dashed over to spectate were pondering the same question.

Some of the well-informed gambling dens in Jiankang were probably taking bets right at this moment.

Shen Qiao gave it serious consideration. "If all goes as expected, Yan Wushi will probably win," he said.

Bai Rong giggled. "You really do look out for your lover! Ruyan Kehui isn't just some puffed-up nobody. I infiltrated Linchuan Academy once—I wanted to disrupt their lecture the day before it started. But then Ruyan Kehui discovered me and he personally chased me around half of Jiankang. I suffered some serious injuries, and it took everything I had to escape. Ever since then, I've been too frightened to rashly provoke that guy anymore. A great and honorable grandmaster like him, splitting hairs with a weak woman like me? How petty and unbecoming of him!"

You're not a weak woman, thought Shen Qiao. *Furthermore, you were the one who snuck into someone else's territory. If they let you come and go as you wish, what's the point of Linchuan Academy's gates? Might as well let people barge in every day.*

As Bai Rong pulled him along, the stockings on her feet gathered nary a speck of dust. Her speed never slowed in the slightest, and she spoke with no shortness of breath. "How I see it, even if Qi Fengge and Cui

Youwang came back to life, Ruyan Kehui might be their match. And this time the duel will be in Jiankang's outskirts, so he'll be on familiar ground. Your dear lover may not be able to win!"

Back in the beginning, when people had misunderstood Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi's relationship, Shen Qiao had still felt the urge to explain. But later, he realized that such explanations were completely unnecessary—people believed whatever they wanted to believe. Whether he explained or not had no effect on their self-serving misunderstandings.

And when it came to someone like Bai Rong, who was purely messing around, deliberately misunderstanding in order to tease him, Shen Qiao could be bothered even less. He simply let her words breeze past him like the wind.

Bai Rong heaved a sweet-sounding *humph* at his nonreaction and said no more.

After leaving the city and traveling about fifteen kilometers, going from field to forest then from forest to another road north, they arrived at a stream at the bottom of a canyon. Here they saw two silhouettes in the distance, standing upon the mountain cliffs and dueling atop those sheer walls.

The ground beneath their feet was no more than a few rocky crags jutting up from the precipice, some no longer than a handspan. An ordinary person would have been terrified to the core just looking at them, let alone landing atop them in the middle of a duel. A moment of carelessness would mean a straight plummet down.

However, Ruyan Kehui and Yan Wushi weren't ordinary people. As they darted about, their movements showed no hint of awkwardness or hesitation—instead they flowed as smoothly as drifting clouds or a babbling stream. It was almost impossible to see them alighting on the stones at all—their figures soared and flitted, their true qi flooding the surroundings and sending fine rubble flying. Where the blasts from their palms struck, clouds seemed to billow from their sleeves as waves the height of men swelled. It was a dazzling sight to behold.

Agitated by their true qi, the waters that once flowed south instantly became a surging fountain. Borrowing its momentum, Yan Wushi guided the spout—combining its water with the Spring Waters finger technique, he

transformed the stream into a thousand razor-sharp blades that swept toward Ruyan Kehui.

From where Shen Qiao and Bai Rong stood, the towering spray churned up by internal energy seemed to swallow Ruyan Kehui whole. Though Bai Rong strained to see, she could only discern a few blurred shadows and was completely unable to spot exactly where Ruyan Kehui would appear, or even from where he'd launch his counterattack.

The mountain gales were strong to begin with. These, combined with the two fighters using most of their internal energy, created two powerful air flows that met within the canyon, twisting together into a giant vortex. The tempest was so fearsome that the river's flow reversed while the mighty winds coursed into robes, causing them to swell and rustle.

Bai Rong had no desire to channel her own internal qi to block the currents. If she tried and found that her internal energy was weaker than the gale, she'd only end up hurting herself.

All she could do was go on enduring the torment that buffeted her, lashing her with vapor and loose leaves. Turning her head, she saw that Shen Qiao had lifted his sleeves in front of his face to shield himself from all the vapor and dust that was pelting at him.

Bai Rong was about to tease him, to ask how he meant to watch the match like that, but then she recalled that he couldn't see anyway. "Are you listening to them duel?" she just had to ask, curious. "What can you hear?"

"I can hear the flow of their true qi," said Shen Qiao. "If I'm not wrong, Academy Master Ruyan is about to draw his sword."

"How do you know?" asked Bai Rong.

Shen Qiao smiled but said nothing.

Just then, Bai Rong looked up and saw Ruyan Kehui, with a single stroke of his sword, slice through the watery trap Yan Wushi had fashioned for him. Overwhelming Yan Wushi's technique with his superior force, the sword glare shattered the massive stream Yan Wushi had churned up with his true qi. It dispersed, the spray cascading down all around them like the flowers scattered by a celestial maiden or a mighty downpour.

At the sight of it, Bai Rong couldn’t resist the urge to show off. “See, isn’t the location I chose excellent? We even have cover overhead,” she gloated. “Meanwhile, those other people can’t even choose a decent viewing spot. And they dare not use their true qi to protect themselves, so they get splashed full in the face!”

The nearby battle continued, with one combatant armed with a sword and the other barehanded. Sword glares engulfed the canyon, suspending and overturning the water, but inside the tumult, Yan Wushi skated about with ease. His hands seemed to make no specific moves; instead they adhered to four basic gestures: pinch, swipe, gather, and flick. Yet he remained brash and carefree, never a step behind.

Bai Rong’s brows knitted in a slight frown. “He doesn’t seem to be using the Spring Waters finger technique?”

“It is the Spring Waters finger technique,” said Shen Qiao, “only transformed. Though it’s only one finger technique, there are a thousand possible variations, but they’re all still the same finger technique. Academy Master Ruyan’s swordplay is the same. If you watch closely, all he’s using is the same move, over and over. But that one move is enough to cover every possibility. Stalwart and infallible, it’s capable of fending off thousands of enemies.”

Bai Rong stared with rapt attention for some time, then realized he was right. Despite herself, her perception of Shen Qiao shifted again.

Everyone knew about Shen Qiao’s former identity, but because of his loss to Kunye, they all doubted his martial abilities. They couldn’t help but feel that not only did he fail to match up to Qi Fengge, but he might not even count among the top ten besides. Though Bai Rong had suffered a loss to him to before, she, too, had always seen him as frail, sickly, unable to keep up for long, and likely to collapse at any moment. As he spoke now, she understood that a grandmaster was ultimately still a grandmaster. His observations alone far surpassed those of the average person.

“You said that Yan Wushi would win, but you didn’t say why.” Bai Rong leaned toward him, and her orchid-scented breath fanned over his ear.

Supporting himself against a rock face, Shen Qiao shuffled a step to the side.

Bai Rong made no comment.

Very seriously, Shen Qiao told her, “I don’t like such things. If you keep doing this, I won’t talk to you anymore.”

Bai Rong forced a laugh. “What’s all this? I haven’t even touched you yet. You’re more prudish than a virgin maiden!”

She reached out a hand toward Shen Qiao.

Sorts like Yuwen Qing aside, when a lovely, peerless beauty like her wanted to seduce someone, even normal men with no interest in philandering fell to her charms. Even if they weren’t totally smitten, they at least felt a certain intoxication blooming in their hearts. But Shen Qiao was an exception. While she wasn’t daring enough to test herself against first-rate martial artists like Yan Wushi or Ruyan Kehui, she’d still been frustrated countless times by Shen Qiao.

Her outstretched hand was blocked by Shen Qiao’s bamboo cane. His expression sank like a stone in water, becoming severe, and he spoke not a single word more.

Bai Rong knew he was keeping his word, and she was both a little angry and a little regretful. She tamped it down and said nothing.

In the space of a moment, Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui had exchanged thousands of blows, but neither one showed a hint of fatigue. Their battle took them from one end of the canyon to the other all as the sun gradually traveled west. The fighters knew nothing of the time, and the spectators, too, completely lost themselves in the fight. Noon passed without anyone’s notice—the combatants had been dueling for more than four hours, but victor and loser had yet to emerge.

Bai Rong’s skills put her among the first-rate of the jianghu, but there was still much for her to learn from this fierce battle—it was on a level she’d never seen before. Today, it was like a mighty gate had opened just a crack, allowing her a peek through to the scenery inside.

Though it was only a crack, it was enough to shake her down to the core.

She finally knew what separated her from the grandmasters, and why she’d never been able to cross that gulf, all this time: her martial arts were

only martial arts, while Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui's martial arts had become a part of their bodies, in their every inhale and exhale, their every pull and release. When they inhaled, their world shrank down to a point; when they exhaled, a hundred streams flowed back to the source. When they pulled, they drew in the sun, moon, and wind; when they released, the land itself sprang forth in acres.

Bai Rong watched, completely enchanted. Unwittingly, she murmured, "Will I ever reach their level in my lifetime?"

This time, Shen Qiao actually answered. "You're very talented."

Bai Rong thought about her cultivation methods. For some reason, her mood suddenly fell, becoming bleak. "I can't cultivate using their path. And my path…they disdain it," she said, self-deprecating.

"From the great Dao springs forth many thousand paths," said Shen Qiao. "Some are fast, some slow, but none are better than any other."

Bai Rong smiled at him sweetly. "Weren't you angry at me just now, saying you wouldn't speak to me? But now you're speaking to me again!"

"If you talk about proper things, naturally I'll give proper answers," said Shen Qiao.

Bai Rong tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear—even this little movement of hers oozed endless charm. Unfortunately, her companion was blind, so there was no one to appreciate it.

"Since you gave me a kernel of guidance just now, I'll return you the favor. I told you before that you should stay away from Yan Wushi, and you must take these words to heart, Shen-lang. Don't just treat them like the passing wind, or else you'll end up dying a pointless death! Someone like you dying in your prime without ever experiencing sex? That'd be such a pity!"

Shen Qiao frowned. "Could you clarify what you mean?"

Bai Rong smiled brightly. "I can't! Even just warning you is a huge risk to this one. If you refuse to take it to heart, there's nothing she can do!"

Then she made a sound of surprise. "Oh, they're finished?"

While they'd spoken, the two silhouettes had abruptly separated, each landing atop a random protrusion in the cliff face.

Bai Rong seemed a little confused. “Was it a draw?”

If even she couldn’t tell, then very few at the scene could. The whispers of spectators rose up around them, all discussing the same question: had Ruyan Kehui won or Yan Wushi?

Or rather, what they really wanted to ask: could Ruyan Kehui really defeat Yan Wushi?

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Chapter 41:
Rescue

WHEN SHE NOTICED Shen Qiao keeping silent, Bai Rong turned to look at him. “Shen-lang, you couldn’t tell either?”

Shen Qiao shook his head but didn’t answer.

After a moment, Ruyan Kehui’s voice drifted over from afar, echoing across the distance, resounding loudly enough to shake the canyon. The eardrums of those assembled jolted as well.

“It’s been a long time since I dueled someone to the fullest,” he said. “Contending with Sect Leader Yan today has been a true joy. I’m deeply grateful for Sect Leader Yan’s wonderful guidance!”

“If you huddle in a corner for too long, you’ll lose sight of the wider world,” said Yan Wushi. “Just like a frog in a well or a leopard in a cage. You’re so accustomed to playing overlord in Southern Chen, Academy Master Ruyan, that when you finally met an equal opponent, you were taken by surprise. My venerable self understands this very well. Once you receive guidance a few more times, the surprise will wear off.”

As always, whenever Yan Wushi opened his mouth, sarcastic comments streamed out. Hearing them was enough to make any listener grit their teeth. But with the way he stood upon the cliff face, hands clasped behind his back and robes dancing, the assembled spectators simply had to look up to him as well. His achievements and martial arts, his incredible strength—many understood that they’d never reach such heights. It was human nature to admire those of great strength, and if anyone claimed they felt no trace of admiration for the egotistical Huanyue Sect Leader—who had the power to warrant such an ego—they’d be lying.

Ruyan Kehui, however, took this all in stride. He laughed. “All right, then someday, when the chance arises, I’ll personally seek out your guidance!”

There was nothing odd about Ruyan Kehui’s voice, and Yan Wushi seemed the same as always too. The spectators grew confused—they

couldn’t detect any sign of injuries through the combatants’ words. The two of them had spent more than half a day’s worth of energy, yet neither of them was injured, and neither of them had won? They puzzled over it.

This once-in-a-lifetime duel between two martial experts was seriously ending in a draw?

Some of them had also been at Banbu Peak, where they’d witnessed Kunye throwing Shen Qiao off the cliff. Even though the Göktürk’s victory left them unhappy and made them mourn the defeat of one of their own, an intense battle warranted such an intense conclusion. Today’s duel between such martial greats as Ruyan Kehui and Yan Wushi should have been on an even higher level, and yet it’d ended like this. They couldn’t help but find it disappointing.

But neither Yan Wushi nor Ruyan Kehui needed to explain their actions to others. After a brief exchange of words, they floated down from the cliff. One landed by the creek, the other on a rocky beach not too far from Shen Qiao and Bai Rong.

Ruyan Kehui courteously cupped his hands at Yan Wushi. “As Sect Leader Yan has come from afar, I ought to do my part as host. How many days does Sect Leader intend to stay in Jiankang? Let me know and I can have Linchuan Academy send you an invitation to be our guest.”

“No need,” Yan Wushi said indifferently. “I can’t stomach the water at your Linchuan Academy—I fear I’ll come away with a belly full of your doctrines on virtues and morality. You should save those for fooling brainless men and witless women!”

Ruyan Kehui smiled and didn’t force the issue. “Then I shall take my leave now!”

With a flick of his sleeves, he turned and departed. His strides appeared ordinary, but he moved great distances in the blink of an eye. It was a truly profound technique, and even swift people could only stare tongue-tied at the dust he left behind.

“With a long sigh did I wipe my tears, at the lives of men weighed down by troubles and despair. Though self-discipline and moral purity I do adore, my morning advice begets naught but evening scorn. First they attacked the cymbidium I wear, then castigated my love for plucking

orchids so fair. For the ideals I pursue within my heart, I'd not regret a thousand deaths to die!"

The sound of singing drifted in from afar—Ruyan Kehui was reciting "Li Sao."[15] The song flowed in his southern accent, resounding through the valley, and the sorrow of the original transformed into valor, rousing the spirits of every listener.

It seemed like Ruyan Kehui's abilities hadn't suffered from his match with Yan Wushi at all, many thought.

Not long ago, Dou Yanshan had issued a challenge to Yan Wushi in front of everyone, but after watching their match, he turned and left without a word.

A couple of troublemakers were displeased at how the Liuhe Guild dominated everything, and one of them shouted after him. "Didn't Guild Leader Dou want to challenge Sect Leader Yan to a duel? Why are you leaving so soon?"

Dou Yanshan stopped in his tracks and turned back, shooting the man a glare that sent shivers through his heart.

"The Dragon Who Crosses Rivers, Li Yue. Perhaps I'm not a match for Sect Leader Yan, but I'm more than enough to handle you. Do you believe me?" said Dou Yanshan, the hint of a smile on his face.

Li Yue hadn't thought Dou Yanshan would call him out by name. He didn't dare say anything more and quickly scuttled away with his tail tucked between his legs.

Yan Wushi gazed at Ruyan Kehui's silhouette as it glided off into the distance, then he flew straight to the treetops of the bamboo forest. Using the long, slim branches to spring forward, he finally landed on the sheer cliff wall where they'd fought and started to climb, his movements as graceful as a falcon's. A couple of breaths later, he was already out of sight.

With the main characters gone, there was no point in lingering. One by one, the spectators all left, each still thinking that it was a pity, although it was difficult to say whether the pity was the draw, or the fact that they were unlikely to witness a duel of such caliber again.

Before the battle, most people had believed that no matter how strong Yan Wushi was, Ruyan Kehui was still a notch above him. After all, while Yan Wushi was one of the top ten, Ruyan Kehui ranked in the top *three*. But after today, they'd no longer dare to say so. Yan Wushi's reputation would surely soar to new heights, and the battle would soon become a hot topic. If all went as expected, it would be the jianghu's most spectacular battle in years.

At some point, Bai Rong, who'd been standing beside Shen Qiao, had vanished without a trace.

She came and went like a shadow—even left without a goodbye.

Shen Qiao didn't chase after her, nor did he retrace his steps down the road he'd taken. Instead, he squinted for a long while, as if scrutinizing something, and then left along another small path.

By now, the sky had darkened completely.

The mountain winds grew colder after nightfall—although it was April, summer hadn't yet taken hold. Through cracks in the canyon walls, the gales howled and wailed like the weeping of ghosts.

The summit of this mountain was somewhat similar to Banbu Peak, where Shen Qiao and Kunye's match had taken place. It was not as tall, but there was little foothold at the peak, and the ground there was treacherously narrow. Only a scant few trees grew there. Their branches rustled in the night wind, too scraggly and thin for anyone to lean on, let alone to use as protection from the night winds.

But when one crossed over the clifftop and went a little down the other side, they'd find a sunken hole that formed a cave, large enough to accommodate three or four people. With a rocky wall against one's back and a stone ledge hanging overhead, it was a natural shelter from the wind.

And inside this cave sat the cross-legged silhouette of a man.

When Li Yue entered, that man didn't move at all, as if he were dead.

"Sect Leader Yan?" he asked, questioning.

If someone else heard him, the name would surely have given them a fright.

Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui had clearly left long before, so why would Sect Leader Yan reappear in this mountain cave?

Li Yue called his name several more times, but there was no reaction from Yan Wushi.

His nerve grew, and as he crept closer, step by step, he groped inside his lapels for a torch, then lit it. He shone the firelight at where Yan Wushi was sitting. The man almost looked like a high monk who'd passed away in self-mummification,[16] as immovable as bedrock. Even the flickering torchlight couldn't make him open his eyes.

Joy suffused Li Yue's heart. He was so excited, even his hands began to tremble imperceptibly.

He was only a second-rate martial artist, but he'd come from a long line of constables, and his judgment was keen. From a young age, he'd been influenced by his father and grandfather and had developed a habit of observing the subtlest details.

Everyone believed Ruyan Kehui and Yan Wushi's strength was equal, thought their final draw was a pity. However, Li Yue didn't see things that way.

It was a battle that had lasted from the day into the night, and both sides had given, if not their all, then at least eight or nine tenths of it. There was no doubting it—where they'd fought most fiercely, the mountain stones had been shattered into powder, boulders half the size of men splintered into gravel in mere seconds, the river waters temporarily reversed, and the surrounding trees snapped clean in two. In the face of such enormous might, the spectators hadn't even dared to block with their internal qi. With just how much destructive power there'd been, could both combatants have really walked away without a scratch?

Even a peerless expert like Qi Fengge eventually met their death. There was always some chance of injury, as long as they weren't true immortals, entirely disconnected from the world.

Though Ruyan Kehui and Yan Wushi both acted as if nothing had happened, Li Yue's intuition told him that the conclusion wasn't so simple.

His martial arts would never catch up to those two, but when the others had left, he'd stayed to wander the surroundings and even scaled the

cliff for a closer look. During the duel, the combatants had stopped for a moment on the peak, and no one knew what had happened during that time. For half a day, Li Yue did nothing but search, but in the end, he found nothing. He was just about to leave, thinking that he was once again overthinking things, when he came upon the cave.

And inside was Yan Wushi.

It was truly a great surprise from the heavens. Li Yue tried to calm himself down, but he couldn't suppress the trembling in his hands, which had his torch quaking. Its firelight wavered unsteadily inside the cave, casting an inexplicable, treacherous pall over the place.

He was certain that Yan Wushi must have been injured and was here to recuperate. Furthermore, for Yan Wushi to remain unaware even as Li Yue approached, it must be no light wound.

If… If he could kill Yan Wushi, display his corpse for everyone to see, then in the space of a night his name would resound through the entire land.

And then everyone in the land would know that the one who'd killed the Demon Lord wasn't the Linchuan Academy Master Ruyan Kehui but the Dragon Who Crosses Rivers, Li Yue himself!

In his extreme elation, he failed to give a thought to the troubles that would follow. For example, if he truly killed Yan Wushi, how would he deal with Huanyue Sect, who would certainly come after his head? And how would he make the world believe that a second-rate fellow like him had managed to kill *the* Yan Wushi, when even Ruyan Kehui couldn't?

But Li Yue didn't consider any of this—the temptation of success and fame had flooded his mind, and involuntarily, he drew the sword at his waist…

The sword's point advanced inch by inch. The Demon Lord, so proud and vigorous earlier that very day, was now right in front of him, dead to the world and completely at his mercy.

In the throes of his excitement, there was a twisted cast to his expression.

Then suddenly, his face froze.

Li Yue stared, wide-eyed, at the bamboo cane that had appeared without warning and was blocking his sword point. Slowly and stiffly, he raised his head, gazing at the cane's owner, who had soundlessly appeared.

"To take advantage of the misfortune of others is not the act of an upright man. If you do this, your martial arts will never advance an inch in your entire life," said Shen Qiao calmly. "Leave."

“What do you know?!” snarled Li Yue. “I was fifteen when I entered the jianghu! People called me talented too, back in my youth! But after I turned twenty-five, my martial arts progress stopped completely. If I take Yan Wushi’s head, my name will surely shake the jianghu!”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “If you kill him, will your martial arts advance? This is only the envy the weak feel toward the strong—when the chance for power over them is dangled before you, you are overwhelmed with excitement. Don’t give your inner demons power over you, or your martial arts will never improve again for the rest of your life.”

By now, Li Yue was thoroughly enraged. “You blind man! Why are you getting involved?! Shen Qiao, don’t think that no one recognizes you! Everyone in the jianghu knows about your collusion with Yan Wushi. Even Xuandu Mountain has expelled you from its doors—you’ve lost all face for Qi Fengge! The disciple of the world’s number one martial artist? Pah! You’re only a sycophant who sold your body to the Demon Lord in return for his favor! Have you found enjoyment in being a slave?! Afraid that if I kill Yan Wushi no one will protect you anymore? If you’re a man, then show some spine! Don’t just lean on other people!”

The words didn’t stoke Shen Qiao’s anger. Ever since his identity had been exposed at the Su residence during the fight against Duan Wenyang, a strange light had surfaced in many of the looks people gave him. Though they might not say so out loud, deep down, their thoughts were much like Li Yue’s. Shen Qiao had heard far worse.

Still, sharp words were only words—as long as they were paid no mind, they couldn’t hurt you in the slightest.

Seeing Shen Qiao stay silent, Li Yue thought the insults he’d slung had worked. He gave a sneering laugh. “Daoist Master Shen, if you get out of my way, then after I kill Yan Wushi we could divide up whatever goods he has on him…”

As he spoke, he thrust out with his sword.

The sword’s glare flashed as it shot out at blistering speed—it was a move Li Yue was quite proud of. Strong enough to pierce through wood, the attack went straight for Yan Wushi’s upper back.

Clang!

An echoing ring sounded. The blade point did not stab into Yan Wushi—instead, the entire sword was sent flying. It arced through the air before clattering right to the ground.

All Li Yue felt was a sharp pain at his wrist, and he cried out despite himself. His reaction was swift too: at the sight of the bamboo cane sweeping toward his waist, he dropped into a crouch while tipping his torso backward, dodging beneath the cane's swipe. Then he sprang upward, making a grab for the cane while sending a kick at Shen Qiao's groin.

But Shen Qiao had already drifted out of reach, then immediately reappeared behind him with unbelievable speed. Li Yue didn't even have time to react before a palm to his back slapped him sideways into the stone wall and knocked him unconscious.

Underestimating Shen Qiao wasn't to blame for Li Yue's defeat—for even if he hadn't, he was destined to lose today.

News of Shen Qiao and Duan Wenyang's duel at the Su residence had never circulated, and the people who'd lost to him, like Bai Rong and Xiao Se, couldn't possibly run around announcing their losses. So, many impressions of him had remained frozen at the match on Banbu Peak—and then, afterward, had come the myriad rumors and hearsay. As a result, opinions of Shen Qiao had plummeted. The more someone had looked up to him before, the more they'd look down on him after. Overnight, Shen Qiao's name became linked to Yan Wushi's, and on top of that, was now synonymous with "homeless cur."

Shen Qiao didn't bother with Li Yue any further, just walked on toward Yan Wushi. When he touched him, a burst of frigid cold pierced through the skin of his palm and into his flesh, almost invasive as it spread through his limbs and body. The chill was so intense he immediately let go, but even so, it clung to his hand for a long while before gradually fading away.

Yan Wushi's body wasn't only as solid and hard as ice, it seemed practically devoid of life. It was as if his five senses were completely sealed—as if that was why he'd remained entirely unaware of Shen Qiao and Li Yue's conversation, as well as their scuffle.

Shen Qiao thought for a moment, then pulled Yan Wushi's hand from his sleeve to examine his pulse, all while enduring that bone-piercing cold.

The pulse still throbbed, and breath still fanned beneath his nose. But his meridians seemed to be in disorder, as if several streams of qi were all weaving, jostling, and colliding against each other, discordant.

In other words, Yan Wushi was showing signs of qi deviation.[17]

The more advanced someone's martial arts, the longer the road they traveled on their way to the top. And then, all the more inevitable that they'd find all kinds of higher pursuits along the way. This meant they became less willing to follow convention, and so the chance of them entering qi deviation was likewise increased.

Peerlessly talented grandmasters like Qi Fengge, Cui Youwang, and Hulugu could have lived long lives and died natural deaths if they'd chosen a peaceful existence. Any of them could have easily managed another ten years. But they refused to pause in their pursuit of martial studies, for to them, that would be a punishment worse than death. And after reaching each new level, attempting the next step was tantamount to scaling the sky. A single moment of carelessness would have easily pushed them into a qi deviation and endangered their lives.

In truth, Shen Qiao had discovered Yan Wushi's current dilemma a long time ago.

The difference between demonic cores and Daoist ones lay in their contrasting paths. Just like heaven and earth, white and black, they could never intersect. Even Cui Youwang, the former top martial artist of the demonic sects, never attempted to join the two cores—nobody had, not in thousands of years. But Yan Wushi's very nature demanded that, in his endless pursuit of martial arts, he try the things all others thought impossible. Hence, during his ten years of seclusion, he'd not only finished practicing all the martial arts recorded inside the *Zhuyang Strategy* scrolls, he'd also used the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi to forge a set of new foundations for himself: a Daoist core. No matter how powerful a person was, their body could only house one set of foundations. But Yan Wushi aspired to have both a demonic and Daoist core coexist inside of him—to fashion a Daoist core while retaining his demonic one.

Of course, this was impossible. How could someone house both a demonic and Daoist core inside their body at the same time? Which was why, for ten years, Yan Wushi did not succeed. Even though his abilities

grew by leaps and bounds, and although he'd already become a martial artist to rival the likes of Qi Fengge, he still couldn't overcome that hurdle. Instead, his efforts left a lurking peril inside him. Normally it wasn't obvious, but during his fight with Ruyan Kehui today, both sides had been forced to go all-out, and so this inner peril had been dragged to the surface.

Shen Qiao frowned deeply. He tried to send his true qi into Yan Wushi's body, but it seemed to reject him. Not only that, but it lashed back at him with a surge of icy qi which rampaged through Shen Qiao's body. In an instant, it'd spread to all his meridians. Shen Qiao jolted and was forced to let go of Yan Wushi's hand to focus on himself. He sat down to regulate his breathing, trying to dissolve the frigid burst of qi.

The moon was cold and bleak, the mountains silent and empty. Owls hooted again and again, sending a shock of desolation right through to his bones. The balmy coolness of early summer was nowhere to be found.

Li Yue's torch had already burnt out. Shen Qiao stood and walked toward the fallen man, hoping to find another few torches on his body that he could light and warm himself with.

"Shen-lang, this one was sitting outside for so long, and you didn't even invite her in! You don't how to take care of a lady at all!" The sound of complaining reached his ears, and a face appeared outside the cave, looking both annoyed and pleased.

Shen Qiao wasn't surprised, nor did he answer.

Smiling brightly, Bai Rong invited herself in. "I waited outside for so long, all because I was afraid that Sect Leader Yan might wake up. Shen-lang, let's make a deal! You didn't want to give Li Yue a shot because he's too ugly. So why not give *me* that shot?"

"I refuse," said Shen Qiao.

Bai Rong started, at a loss for how to react. "This one hasn't even finished yet. How could you refuse her already?"

Shen Qiao felt around on Li Yue's body and found two more torches. He lit one, the fire's glow immediately illuminating half the cave.

Bai Rong shifted ever so slightly, reappearing at Yan Wushi's side in an instant. She raised a palm high and aimed it at his head, but she was

blocked by Shen Qiao, who'd somehow appeared there as well. They quickly exchanged dozens of blows inside the cramped cave. Hehuan Sect was famous for their charm techniques and pair cultivation, but their martial abilities were no less potent than the likes of Huanyue Sect and Fajing Sect. Although she was young, Bai Rong's grasp of martial arts was already spectacular. She used Sang Jingxing's set of footwork techniques, "Sixteen Steps from Heaven to Abyss," coupled with her palm techniques, so that the variations in her moves became endless and unpredictable, almost impossible to defend against.

She knew that Shen Qiao wasn't someone she could subdue by herself, so she'd launched a pre-emptive attack in a bid to finish things quickly. She executed more than ten palm strikes in just the blink of an eye. Combined with her ever-changing, unpredictable footwork, it was as if she were striking at Shen Qiao from every direction at once. She even giggled as she attacked. "Shen-lang, you're so sly! Last time when we fought, you mimicked Yan Wushi's Spring Waters finger technique and gave me such a scare. Now that I've seen through you, you can't scare me anymore!"

Shen Qiao didn't speak. His current martial abilities put him just about equal to Bai Rong. Which meant that, under ordinary circumstances, neither of them could do anything to the other, and that perhaps Bai Rong was even the slightest bit stronger. During their last encounter, Bai Rong's fear of his finger attack had given him an opening to exploit, but there wouldn't be a second time—Bai Rong was clever and had learned better.

She might have been all smiles and gentle words while speaking to Shen Qiao before, but when it came time to take action, she showed not one shred of mercy.

Bai Rong had observed from outside for a while because she couldn't tell if Yan Wushi had really entered qi deviation. But thanks to the commotion Li Yue had cooked up, she'd been able to confirm her suspicions.

And now that she wanted to kill Yan Wushi, Shen Qiao was her biggest obstacle.

"Shen-lang, didn't you feel sorry for my situation in Hehuan Sect? If I kill Yan Wushi, I'll have eliminated a great enemy for them, and from then on, no one in Hehuan Sect will dare look down on me. This one doesn't

need you to do anything at all—just stand aside and watch. Simpler than lifting a finger, yet you won't do this one little thing?"

Bai Rong's eyes were soulful as she pleaded and wheedled, but her attacks didn't let up for an instant.

"Shen-lang, was Yan Wushi truly kind to you? He might have saved you, but he only sees you as a plaything—a way to indulge his little hobby of messing with people. You have a gentle nature, so you repay every kindness you receive ten times over. But if he was truly kind to you, why does he leave you in danger time and again? It can't be that…you've truly fallen for the Demon Lord, can it?

"If you let me kill Yan Wushi, I'll do everything I can to help you recover your martial arts and regain your position as Xuandu Mountain's sect leader. Isn't having power within your grasp a hundred times better than being forced to depend on others?"

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Chapter 42:
Repaying Kindness

SHEN QIAO HAD nothing more to say to her. The bamboo cane in his hands flashed, quick as a shadow. It struck with the force of a howling squall, flooding the cramped space with true qi. The torch had long ago been extinguished, and moonlight spilled inside the cave to interweave with the blows from their palms like a river of stars splashed across the sky, painting a vivid, elegant scene.

Wherever their internal qi surged and collided, it cut like a knife. In short order, Li Yue's face and hands were sliced and bleeding. Only Yan Wushi continued to sit as before, seemingly as impervious as diamond. True qi and shock waves buffeted him, but they left little mark.

Bai Rong was impatient, fearful of the unwanted turns the fight could take if it dragged on. With a flick of her sleeves, countless grains of fine powder scattered outward—colorless and devoid of smell, they accompanied her palm blasts. A normal martial artist would have had time to avoid the powder, but no matter how sensitive Shen Qiao's ears were, he couldn't detect it right away. Only a moment later, numbness spread over his body, his arms and legs going weak, telling him he'd fallen for Bai Rong's ploy.

"Shen-lang, oh Shen-lang," said Bai Rong. "You almost ruined things for me, but I'll still show you mercy. The drug isn't poisonous—it'll just incapacitate your arms and legs for about half a day. You must remember this favor I showed you. But for now, could you please stop getting in my way?"

She still sounded mellow and sweet, like she was playing coy with her lover, all while she struck at Shen Qiao with her palm. After all, the drug might not be completely effective, so it was better to beat him until he couldn't fight back. That way, she could take care of Yan Wushi in peace.

Her blow struck him, and Shen Qiao slammed into a rough, jagged wall of stone. Pain tore through him, and he felt something warm and wet start to seep through his robes.

“Shen-lang, don’t hold my ruthlessness against me,” Bai Rong said gently. “You insisted on protecting him, so I had to get rid of you first. Don’t worry, though! I’ve changed my mind—a dead Yan Wushi won’t do me any good, but a brainless idiot as Huanyue Sect Leader? That would serve Hehuan Sect’s interests far better, so I’ll spare his life!”

She raised her lovely, fair palm as she spoke, then swung it down at the crown of Yan Wushi’s head.

Bai Rong was certain she’d used the perfect amount of force. With this hit, she wouldn’t damage Yan Wushi’s skull in the slightest but rather only his brain.

But before her palm met its target, she was forced to dodge to the side. The bamboo cane darted after her like a shadow.

“Didn’t you inhale the drug?” Bai Rong was incredulous.

“I did a little,” said Shen Qiao. “But I held my breath in time.” Shen Qiao coughed, his movements slightly slowing.

Spotting her chance, Bai Rong attacked, using her “Sixteen Steps from Heaven to Abyss” to appear before Shen Qiao like a phantom. She jabbed her index and middle fingers toward Shen Qiao’s heart, slipping right through his defenses. She wanted to force him to retreat, but Shen Qiao didn’t withdraw—he even moved forward, forcing Bai Rong to stay her hand.

“Do you like him that much?! Enough to give your life to protect him?!” Bai Rong yelled, utterly exasperated.

Shen Qiao remained silent. It wasn’t clear whether he was unwilling to explain or thought speaking would be too much effort.

Right at that moment, Yan Wushi’s tightly closed eyes sprang open.

Shen Qiao’s back was to him, so he didn’t see it happen, but Bai Rong did.

Her heart leapt in shock at the sight of Yan Wushi staring straight at her. Unable to determine what sort of state he was in, she said, “Shen-lang, your lover’s awake! Do you still have the time to fight me?”

Sure that she was lying, Shen Qiao naturally ignored her. It wasn’t until a cool breeze from behind reached him that he became aware, and he

was forced to turn to block.

Bai Rong took this chance to move, alighting softly near the cave's entrance. "You thought I was lying? Well, you two have fun catching up. I won't interfere!"

With another giggle, she vanished from the mouth of the cavern.

She could handle someone like Shen Qiao, but with someone like Yan Wushi in the mix—especially one who could fight—the only outcome was death. So, once she was certain Yan Wushi was awake, she made the immediate decision to cut and run.

A brutal swipe from the front sent the bamboo cane flying. Shen Qiao didn't even have time to speak before his throat was grabbed in a vicious choke hold.

"Shen Qiao."

The voice was bone-chilling; not a trace of emotion was in it.

The grip around his throat was so crushing, his neck was about to snap in two!

Shen Qiao was about to suffocate, but in his alarm, he sent out a palm strike.

Yet Yan Wushi didn't evade—he took the blow straight on. His grip slackened and he backed up several steps, but he didn't hack up any blood.

Meanwhile, Shen Qiao bowed over at the waist, coughing so hard that tears streamed down his face. The remaining strength drained from his body, and he slumped to the ground.

After a long time, Yan Wushi spoke again. "Why are you here?"

His voice sounded much closer to his normal tone, but Shen Qiao remained wary. He leaned against the stone wall, gasping. "You had a qi deviation."

Yan Wushi looked at Li Yue, who still lay inside the cave, then shifted his gaze back to Shen Qiao. Suddenly he smiled. "I'm not wrong, am I?" he said. "Such a good opportunity was presented to you, and you didn't seize it and kill me? Or even hide on the sidelines and watch me get killed—you actually intervened."

“Why would I kill you?” asked Shen Qiao.

Yan Wushi burst out laughing. “A-Qiao, did you spend so much time with me that you actually fell in love?”

Shen Qiao went on panting, then slowly said three words: “Repaying my debt.”

“Repaying your debt?” Surprised colored Yan Wushi’s smile. “I remember telling you early on that I only saved you on a whim. I wanted to see if you were qualified to be my opponent. And I wanted to enjoy seeing whether a poor soul like you would break down—someone who had nothing, who’d been betrayed and abandoned by your dearest kin. I wanted to see if you’d be unable to endure the shock and lose your mind.”

“No matter motives, it doesn’t change that you saved me. Even if you’d saved me only to kill me later, then I should still be grateful before I’m killed.”

Yan Wushi burst out laughing even louder. “A-Qiao, oh A-Qiao, I don’t think you should be a Daoist! If only you’d practiced Buddhism instead. With your soft heart, you might have already cultivated yourself into the highest of holy monks! Then you wouldn’t have been tossed off a cliff and ended up in such a tragic state.”

Shen Qiao ignored his sarcasm. He drew a breath, then continued, “With Yuwen Yong in power now, Zhou could almost be called peaceful. If you weren’t here, and only Bian Yanmei and Yu Shengyan led Huanyue Sect, they *might* be able to fend off the ambitions of the various powers surrounding you. And if misfortune were to strike down Yuwen Yong, the ministers and officials *might* be able to carry on serving a new emperor. But if other countries seized upon that opportunity to declare war, then in the end, only the ordinary civilians will suffer.”

Yan Wushi smiled. “Well, your tongue has certainly grown sharper.”

In the middle of their conversation, Li Yue woke up.

At first he looked stunned and bewildered, but when he saw Yan Wushi eyeing him with interest, his shock immediately transformed into panic. He half stumbled, half crawled to his feet, then dashed out of the entrance without another word.

Yan Wushi carelessly flicked a pebble from his hand. The stone shard grazed past Li Yue's ear, leaving a fine trickle of blood.

Li Yue shrieked and ran even faster.

If Yan Wushi had wanted to kill him, he'd have been a cold corpse by now.

Shen Qiao didn't know why Yan Wushi had changed his mind, and he didn't have the strength left to guess. He leaned against the wall, but the dried gash on his back ached more and more. If it wasn't for the true qi circulating through his body, he'd have been frozen solid.

Yan Wushi turned to him and said, "I won't kill him, because there are myriad ways to give someone a fate worse than death. He failed to kill me, so from now on, he's bound to live in eternal fear of my retribution. His life will never grow easier. All I need to do is send people under my name to harass him from time to time, and he'll scare himself half to death for me. Don't you think that's much more entertaining?"

But another thought occurred to Shen Qiao. "Even if I hadn't intervened, Li Yue and Bai Rong couldn't have killed you, right?"

"That's right," said Yan Wushi. "I couldn't move, but I could still sense the outside world. I heard your conversations—you discovered the freezing qi inside me. If they'd tried to kill me, they'd have been struck with the backlash from the cold qi too."

Shen Qiao sighed softly. "Bai Rong left," he said suddenly.

Until just then, Bai Rong had been lurking outside the cave, trying to confirm whether or not Yan Wushi had really recovered. It wasn't until Li Yue fled and she heard Yan Wushi and Shen Qiao's conversation that she finally gave up and left too.

Yan Wushi laughed. "Why do you sigh, A-Qiao? You climbed all this way up the mountain, ignored all dangers to protect me. How could I not do you a favor? You don't like seeing me kill people, so I'll let them go this time. Not an issue. And it'd be such a pity if that little girl Bai Rong died now. With her around, Hehuan Sect has quite a lot of fun to look forward to!"

He rose, then bent down to lift Shen Qiao. But the moment his hand touched the other man's back, Shen Qiao shuddered—probably because his robe rubbed against his wound.

Yan Wushi noticed and pulled Shen Qiao onto his back instead.

He'd just had a qi deviation and been in a perilous situation, but now he seemed perfectly fine, treading down the cliff from the cave as if it were flat ground. With a moment's effort, they were already at the foot of the mountain.

After they returned to the guest complex, Shen Qiao applied medicine, regulated his breathing for recuperation, and then entered straight into a three-day seclusion.

When he emerged three days later, the envoys of Zhou had already completed their mission and were preparing to return home.

On hearing that he'd been wounded, Yuwen Qing sent many people to the guest complex with tonics. He harbored secret curiosity about the conclusion of Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui's battle—he'd heard it came to a draw, but he didn't know any details. As he didn't have the courage to ask Yan Wushi in person, he wanted to find Shen Qiao. Unfortunately, Shen Qiao had entered seclusion and was unable to meet him, so Yuwen Qing waited for three days, anxious out of his mind, until Shen Qiao finally came out.

He then set off in haste to find Shen Qiao. First, he asked after his health, then said awkwardly, "I didn't think it would be so crowded that day. I almost got separated from Yu Zi. I hope you weren't seriously injured."

"Many thanks to Yuwen-xiong for your concern," said Shen Qiao. "It was only a few minor injuries. Most of them have already healed."

"I'll be honest with you," said Yuwen Qing. "We are about to head back to Zhou, and if all goes as expected, some from Linchuan Academy will be there to send us off. But who exactly won when Junior Preceptor Yan and Academy Master Ruyan dueled? You watched the fight from the sidelines, so you must know everything. The Junior Preceptor said nothing, and I'm too afraid to press him for answers, but if he won, then I can taunt

the people from Linchuan Academy a little and show off the prestige of our Great Zhou!”

Shen Qiao hadn’t expected Yuwen Qing to rush over and see him for something so trivial. He thought it somewhat comical. “Sect Leader Yan won by a narrow margin, I believe.”

“Ah.” Yuwen Qing’s brows curved in pleasure, but there was also some disbelief. “Truly? I’ve heard that Ruyan Kehui is a very powerful martial artist, enough to rank among the top three in the world. Perhaps he might even qualify for number one?”

Yuwen Qing wouldn’t be able to understand martial arts even with a thorough explanation, so Shen Qiao picked the simplest answer. “In truth, both of them were injured. For Sect Leader Yan, it triggered some old injuries, but in the case of Academy Master Ruyan, if my guess is correct, his meridians were damaged. He likely won’t be able to use his true qi freely for a month.”

“Why only a month? I’d say he won’t be able to fight anyone for three months.”

A cool voice came from the door, and Yan Wushi walked in.

“If you had something to ask, why didn’t you come ask me personally?”

For some reason, the sight of Yan Wushi always rattled Yuwen Qing. The moment Yan Wushi’s terrifying gaze fell on him, it was as if needles sprouted on his chair, leaving him squirming uncontrollably. “The Junior Preceptor has thousands of things to attend to everyday,” he immediately replied, with a nervous laugh. “So I dare not disturb you—didn’t want to disturb you at all. I’m about to go supervise them and make sure the packing’s getting done. Once we’re ready to set out, I’ll send someone over to tell you.”

The moment he finished speaking, he sped right out the door.

Yan Wushi turned to Shen Qiao. “How was it?”

Shen Qiao knew what he was asking about. “Your battle with Ruyan Kehui was brilliant—it was exceptional. Perhaps others gleaned some new insights, but during my three days of seclusion, I made no progress beyond

healing a few old wounds. It feels as if there's some sort of barrier preventing me from advancing any further. I'm left spinning in place. The only good things are that my circulation of true qi has smoothed out a bit, and my eyes have improved somewhat—I can roughly make out light and shadow now."

What a pity, said a voice deep inside Yan Wushi's heart.

Cold and unfeeling, callous and heartless.

But none of that showed on his face. Instead he gave Shen Qiao a small smile. "That's good."

Soon, word of the duel between Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui spread like wildfire.

What everyone most cared about was who had won.

In Southern Chen, Ruyan Kehui wasn't only famous in the jianghu, he was also a significant figure in the imperial court. The Lord of Chen treated him with utmost respect, and Empress Liu was also from Linchuan Academy. Hence, in the eyes of many southerners, Linchuan Academy's status was so special and noteworthy, he may as well have been the head of Confucianism and martial arts in the Southern Dynasty.

With that kind of status and reputation, even the idea of Ruyan losing to Yan Wushi was practically unimaginable.

However, everyone who'd watched the fight that day said it was a draw—that was fact. And ever since Ruyan Kehui had returned, he'd shut himself inside Linchuan Academy and never left. No matter who came around to visit, they couldn't get a meeting with him. Yan Wushi was the same—he stayed in the guest complex and never went elsewhere. This only spurred on the rumor mill further. Some said that both had been grievously wounded, some that Ruyan Kehui had won by a slight margin, and now Yan Wushi was too ashamed to show his face.

At the same time, Yuwen Qing sent a message saying that he wished to invite Academy Master Ruyan to a banquet that Sect Leader Yan was throwing at the guest complex. He said that he hoped the Academy Master could take the time to honor them with his attendance. This was purely his own concoction: a method of embarrassing the southerners that he'd come up with after hearing Shen Qiao's report on the duel. If the Linchuan

Academy Master didn’t make an appearance, he could mock them relentlessly. And if Ruyan Kehui *did* attend, that’d work too—after all, he’d never said that Yan Wushi would show up at the banquet.

Though the two countries had formed an alliance, everyone knew it was only temporary. They all shared the same goal right now, but the moment that goal disappeared, the allies would return to being enemies. Keeping up the pretense on the surface worked well enough; underneath it all, the fighting had never ceased.

Quite a few southerners were upset about the invitation. They all thought that Yuwen Qing was going too far. One after another, a good number who thought highly of their own martial prowess came to the guest complex asking to challenge Yan Wushi.

But Yan Wushi was the kind of man who reserved even his egotism and conceit for those on his level. The mediocre remainder weren’t worth his attention, so he couldn’t care less what they said or thought. And if he really were to “personally greet” them, they wouldn’t so much as greet the sun the next day.

In fact, Yan Wushi didn’t need to do anything at all. The men who’d come with Yuwen Qing were enough to deal with the martial artists who occasionally came knocking.

Two days later, news finally arrived from Linchuan Academy. They graciously declined Yuwen Qing’s invitation, saying that the Academy Master was in seclusion and unable to meet with anyone.

This reply seemed to confirm Yuwen Qing’s insinuations, and those voices chastising the Zhou envoys for being too arrogant vanished overnight. Of course, Yuwen Qing was completely gleeful, and he happily went to inform Shen Qiao, only to hear the news from Ruru that Shen Qiao had already left.

As Ruru was completely in the dark, Yuwen Qing was forced to look for Yan Wushi, even though he was terrified of speaking to him.

“Junior Preceptor,” he said, “does your esteemed self know where Daoist Master Shen has gone?”

“What, do you yearn for him that much?” asked Yan Wushi in return.

Yuwen Qing tentatively gave him an apologetic smile. “Nothing of the sort. Daoist Master Shen traveled here with us, so he should be returning with us as well. But now he’s disappeared, so I ought to ask about it.”

“He left,” said Yan Wushi.

“Eh?”

Originally, Yan Wushi had no interest in telling him too much, but Yuwen Qing’s disappointed and bewildered expression amused him. “He told me a while ago that he would leave on his own after he’d seen my venerable self’s duel with Ruyan Kehui.”

“But where can he go by himself?” Yuwen Qing muttered. “Didn’t he say he couldn’t return to Xuandu Mountain?”

Yan Wushi laughed. “Yuwen Qing, you brought your beloved concubine along for the trip, but now you’re wavering? You’re so worried about Shen Qiao—is this venerable one nothing to you?”

Though he was smiling as he spoke, a shudder ran through Yuwen Qing. Losing the nerve to ask any further questions, he excused himself and beat a hasty retreat.

Watching the pathetic figure Yuwen Qing cut as he ran away, Yan Wushi languidly put down the book in his hand and looked out the window.

A smile still hung on the corner of his lips, but in his eyes was a bone-chilling amusement.

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Just then, Shen Qiao was on a road, walking north.

There was precisely the right amount of sun. Dressed in blue, carrying his bamboo staff, the ends of his robes fluttering, he couldn’t hold back a smile that curled the corners of his lips.

Squinting, and with a hand against his forehead to block out the sunlight, he could see the scene before him. Though he couldn’t see as

clearly as before his injuries, what vision he did have now, he appreciated more than ever.

Before leaving, he'd gone to find Yuwen Qing and say his farewells, but the other man hadn't been there. So, he penned a letter to Yuwen Qing and asked Ruru to pass it to him on his behalf. But Ruru was very much afraid of her master, so it was possible she'd given the letter to Yan Wushi first. Still, there wasn't much in the letter beyond the standard courtesies.

Shen Qiao had thought Yan Wushi would refuse to let him go, but things had gone surprisingly smoothly—Yan Wushi said little and agreed straight away, leaving Shen Qiao somewhat taken aback.

This Huanyue Sect Leader's character was just as the rumors painted him: mercurial and unpredictable. Even after they'd spent so much time together, Shen Qiao still dared not say that he completely understood him.

Perhaps it was because he'd refused to accept the demonic core, coupled with how hopeless the project of recovering his martial arts seemed. Yan Wushi no longer considered him a worthy rival, and in his disappointment, had been delighted to let him go. Or perhaps it was because he'd arduously climbed mountains to fend off Li Yue and Bai Rong's attacks, and that act had finally moved Yan Wushi. Wouldn't that prove that no matter how callous and unfeeling a person was, a trace of humanity still lay deep within their hearts?

Shen Qiao shook his head and laughed helplessly at his own conjectures. Perhaps he did think too well of others, but if made him happier, what was wrong with believing the best of people?

His journey out of Jiankang progressed smoothly. The region south of the Yangtze had always been prosperous since ancient times. It was bordered by land and water, and was politically stable as well. There, it was easy to forget that the world was still in turmoil.

However, as he crossed over the border of Chen and entered Qi, still heading north, the number of travelers and merchants dropped noticeably, and the expressions on their faces held less contentment, less joy. Instead, there was a nervousness and fatigue about them.

Shen Qiao found that he greatly enjoyed observing the emotions on all their faces, perhaps because he'd spent so long judging a person's state

by their voice. Even if he couldn’t see clearly, there were still quite a few discoveries to be made.

April became May as he traveled, walking and resting at intervals. His pace wasn’t slow, for when the mood came, he’d also apply some qinggong. Almost no one knew that this traveling scholar, wandering along carefree and relaxed supported by a cane, was actually the downtrodden former sect leader of Xuandu Mountain who’d been beholden to the Demon Lord.

By now, the news of Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui’s battle had spread throughout the populace. It seemed there was a grand martial arts conference happening in Liang Province, for Shen Qiao saw many people from the jianghu rushing that way and heard them all talking about the duel. Naturally, the people of Qi didn’t revere Ruyan Kehui the way the southerners did. Instead, their words were full of praise for Yan Wushi. It was human nature to admire those of great strength, and Yan Wushi’s strength won him many admirers—even some who weren’t from the demonic discipline.

Shen Qiao was in a teahouse outside Liang Province’s capital at the moment, listening to other patrons discuss how brilliant the fight between Yan Wushi and Ruyan Kehui had been. They hadn’t witnessed it personally, but their accounts were so exaggerated and flowery one would think they’d seen it themselves. Shen Qiao couldn’t help but smile.

There was an empty seat beside him, and soon someone sat down in it. Shen Qiao had his head lowered as he sipped his tea, and before he could look up, he heard the newcomer say, “What a coincidence!”

Shen Qiao found himself at a loss for words.

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Chapter 43:
Shen Qiao Weeps

SHEN QIAO RESTED his forehead in his palm. “This humble Shen thinks that you can no longer call this a coincidence.”

Yan Wushi languidly turned over the cup on the table and filled it halfway with water. He didn’t drink, just left it there. “It’s such a small world. We part at the ends of the sky, only to meet at the edges of the sea. This venerable one thinks we’re quite linked by fate.”

“Why has Sect Leader Yan come here?”

“Well, why have you come here?” asked Yan Wushi.

“I’m heading to the capital of Qi, Yecheng.”

“Oh? Truly a coincidence. I’m heading to Yecheng as well.”

Shen Qiao was caught between laughing and crying. “I’m going to look for someone. Surely you’re not looking for somewhere there as well?”

“What a strange thing to say,” said Yan Wushi. “Why am I not allowed to look for someone?”

Shen Qiao ignored him and silently finished his tea and snacks. After paying his bill, he picked up his cane, ready to continue on his way.

Yan Wushi stood as well. With his hands clasped behind him, he followed after Shen Qiao, not fast but not slow.

He maintained distance of about seven to eight paces between them. Never closer, never farther.

Shen Qiao took the bizarre situation in stride. He entered Liang Province, found an inn, and set down his featherlight traveling bags. Then he ordered some food and went to sit on the second floor, where he slowly ate.

It was a little past noon. Most guests had already finished their meals and left, so while the second floor was otherwise empty, the floor below

was quite lively. The noon market had just opened, and a number of people rushed toward the area carrying their wares.

Shen Qiao ordered a jug of plum juice. He'd only taken half a sip when Yan Wushi emerged, climbing the stairs in the corner.

He smiled at Shen Qiao. "Your expression doesn't have the joy of someone who's seen their old comrade from a distant land."

Shen Qiao said helplessly, "I'd be happier if Sect Leader Yan hadn't come just to see me."

"Indeed, I didn't come just to see you," said Yan Wushi.

He sat down next to him, and Shen Qiao called the waiter over. Soon a second jug of plum juice arrived, together with a bowl and chopsticks.

Yan Wushi laughed. "Why is A-Qiao in such a hurry to draw a line between us?"

Shen Qiao didn't take him seriously. "I recall that you value cleanliness. You would never share a jug with someone else."

Yan Wushi didn't reply.

"Why did Sect Leader Yan come here, if not to find me?" asked Shen Qiao.

"Yuwen Yong has already drawn up a large-scale plan to conquer Qi. All of Qi is in terror over the news. Even Hehuan Sect has begun to splinter from within."

He didn't use the fresh jug the waiter had brought. Instead, he picked up Shen Qiao's jug and poured some into his bowl, then brought it to his mouth and took a sip.

"Yuan Xiuxiu wants to collaborate with Huanyue Sect, but Sang Jingxing refuses. The two of them fell out, and now Yuan Xiuxiu has sent me a message saying that Sang Jingxing is currently in Yecheng. She'd like me to help her kill him."

Although Sang Jinxing had been the only disciple of Riyue Sect's final leader, Cui Youwang, he hadn't pursued the reunification of the demonic sects when Riyue Sect splintered. Instead, he pursued an ardent relationship with Yuan Xiuxiu. In this way, he became an extraordinarily

high-ranked elder in Hehuan Sect. But if anyone were to look down on him for this choice, thinking that it meant he was incompetent, they'd be gravely mistaken.

The man reveled in murder, was a fanatic when it came to beauties and sex, and had countless enemies, but he also possessed overwhelming martial prowess that was in a class of its own. His ranking among the world's top ten was especially difficult to locate—some claimed he ranked in the top three, while others disagreed.

Word had it that he'd absorbed the entirety of Cui Youwang's martial arts before his master's death. Some went even further, claiming that Sang Jingxing was a monster who'd betrayed all decency—killing his own master to steal his martial arts. Though no one had witnessed the crime, Sang Jingxing's reputation was such that many people were happy to add it to the tally of his misdeeds.

Shen Qiao sighed. "Sang Jingxing must have worked hard to help Yuan Xiuxiu establish Hehuan Sect. Even if they've fallen out and become enemies now, surely there's no need to go so far as killing each other!"

Yan Wushi sneered. "Even Xuandu Mountain has martial siblings turning against each other. When it happens in demonic sects, where 'the strong prey on the weak' reigns supreme, such incidents will only be more overt. Now Sang Jingxing has created his own faction inside Hehuan Sect, and the disciples in it only pay lip service to Yuan Xiuxiu while silently undermining her authority. Just because she doesn't express her hatred doesn't mean she feels none. Otherwise, why has she yet to seek revenge on you for killing Huo Xijing right in front of her? He was Sang Jingxing's disciple."

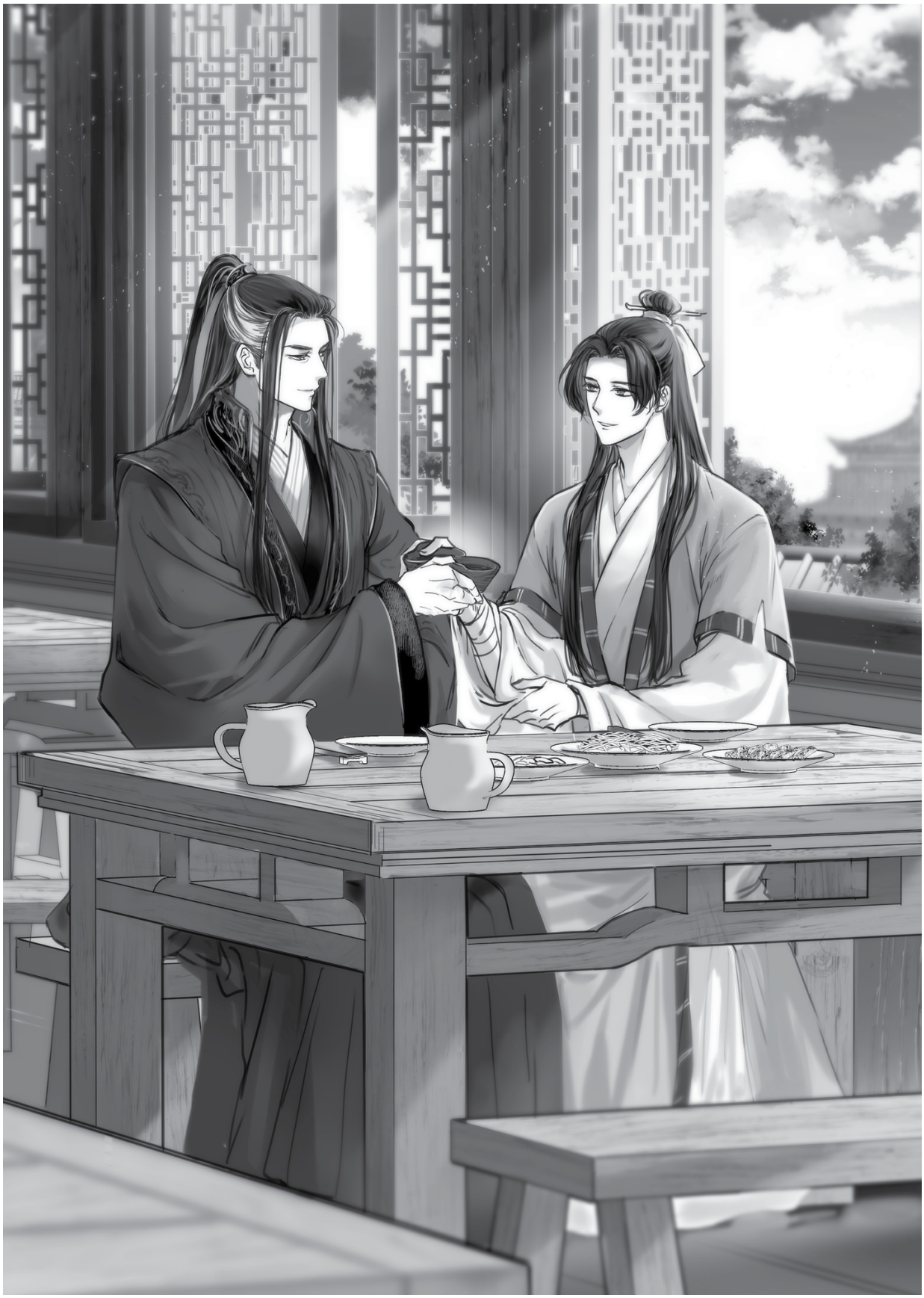
"It's highly likely that Yuan Xiuxiu wants to have you kill Sang Jingxing for her."

"Even if that's the case, wouldn't it be good news for my venerable self if Sang Jingxing were to die? A Hehuan Sect without him, with only Yuan Xiuxiu, could never contend with Huanyue Sect. And once Zhou annexes Qi, their ability to stir up trouble will be greatly limited as well."

Shen Qiao shook his head and raised his bowl. "Then I can only hope that Sect Leader Yan achieves his goals."

“Many thanks.”

Their bowls clinked, the resulting sound crisp and pleasant. Shen Qiao thought back to when they’d first met. He’d never have imagined that there’d come a time where he and Yan Wushi could chat peacefully like this, and he smiled despite himself.



Yan Wushi saw the smile on Shen Qiao's lips but averted his eyes and picked up a piece of asparagus with his chopsticks. "Did you find the person you were looking for?"

"Not yet," said Shen Qiao. "I've heard that they're on the road, but I haven't been able to catch up to them."

"You're looking for Yu Ai's group, aren't you?"

Shen Qiao didn't hide it. "Yes. Now that I've recovered some of my martial arts, enough to defend myself, I have no need to fear what Yu Ai's planning. Even if we can't come to an agreement, I'll still be able to walk away. I've heard that he brought two elders and Gu-shimei with him on his travels, and they're heading to the Eastern Khaganate. I wish to speak with Gu-shimei first."

"Since Yu Ai's left Xuandu Mountain, they're without a leader right now," said Yan Wushi. "Why not return there first and take back the sect leader's seat? Do that and he'll be powerless when he returns."

Shen Qiao shook his head. "Yu Ai is very careful—he left no vulnerabilities, not even with the poisoning incident. If he was confident enough to leave Xuandu Mountain for the Khaganate, he must have planned everything out ahead of time and would have no qualms about my possible return. After all, he couldn't have done everything himself. Putting aside the majority who have been kept in the dark about his plans, there must have been people within Xuandu Mountain secretly supporting him from the very beginning. If I return now, I'll most likely be walking into a trap. On the contrary, the people he has with him now might be the ones who intend to subvert him. Gu-shimei grew up under my watch. I still have some confidence in her."

Yan Wushi listened seriously, then nodded and said with a smile, "Then this venerable one hopes that your wishes come true as well."

Most days, even when his tone was soft and gentle, it would still hold a hint of mockery. It was rare to see him speak so placidly and normally, so Shen Qiao smiled too. "Many thanks."

There was still quite some distance to Yecheng from Liang Province. The two of them stayed one more day in Liang Province, then set off northward. Once they were out of Liang Province, the closer they got to

Yecheng, the more refugees they saw. Shen Qiao had already been to Yecheng, but the scene before him now was even bleaker than the last time. He had to halt and look ahead, watching the vagrants as they slowly trudged along the dry riverbed in the direction of the capital, their motions listless and eyes dull.

He could remember encountering this kind of scene countless times before. It seemed like a world completely apart from the jianghu.

In truth, most people who could carve out space for themselves in the jianghu were from families with money to spare. Some of them were even wealthy landlords, or their families ran large enterprises. Such as the Liuhe Guild, who did business by both land and sea, and whose dealings spanned all nations. They were a true example of a powerful organization. And of course, Huanyue Sect was even more impressive. They held deep ties to the Zhou imperial court, so they had many estates—not only in the capital but all over Zhou.

Even Xuandu's Violet Palace, who insisted on withdrawing from mundane affairs, had in truth purchased all of Xuandu Mountain during its first generation, after its founder had established the sect. The fields at the foot of the mountain, cultivated by residents of Xuandu Town, were all rented from Xuandu Mountain. The successive generations of sect leaders all had kind hearts and set fair rental fees, but the combined income, taken together with what Xuandu Mountain produced itself, was plenty enough to support Xuandu Mountain's disciples.

Only people who lived comfortable and worry-free lives could concentrate on practicing martial arts and pursuing such aspirations. How could someone who couldn't even feed themselves, who had to worry about their next meal, be in the frame of mind to train?

As for the refugees before him now, from the time they were born, their children were forced to face both natural and man-made calamities, and were left hungry every day. Crueler still, the children might even be used as reserve rations by their parents. Even if one or two of them had the outstanding potential to be martial geniuses, it was very likely that they'd perish before discerning eyes discovered their talents.

"A-Qiao's soft heart is acting up again!" Surprisingly, Yan Wushi didn't mock him this time—there was a smile in his tone, but also a sigh.

Shen Qiao shook his head. “In truth, I was also an orphan. I don’t know who my parents are, but I was left abandoned in the desolate wilderness. It’s said that I was very weak after birth and almost died in my swaddling clothes. Perhaps that’s why my parents abandoned me. Or maybe they were too poor to raise me. In any case, I was fortunate to meet Shizun, who saved my life. So every time I see these people, I always regret how little I can do for them. If I’d realized this earlier, while I was on Xuandu Mountain, I could have directed the sect to reenter the secular world. Then maybe I could have taken in some poor children as disciples and saved a few more lives.”

“Life is never fair,” said Yan Wushi. “Some are the prides of heaven from birth, surrounded by riches and luxuries, while others are born without even kin to rely on and have to struggle in poverty. People like you, who can judge every person by themselves, are the rarest of rare. Most are like Chen Gong—filled with bottomless greed, constantly overestimating themselves, and believing they can always get more. If Xuandu Mountain took in a couple more disciples, it’s highly possible you’d end up with a couple more ingrates like Yu Ai.”

Shen Qiao smiled helplessly. “But it’s also possible that we’d end up with a couple more people of great promise, the kind who can aid those in crisis, who could rectify the course of the world!”

Yan Wushi disagreed. “If you want something, you must fight for it yourself instead of dreaming that someone will come and help you. A person’s life and death are a result of their own choices and have nothing to do with others.”

Shen Qiao spoke no more.

Not far in the distance, a couple walked toward them, dragging a small boy who was little more than a bag of bones. As they walked, they quarreled. Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi’s excellent ears naturally heard part of the argument.

They’d exchanged their own child for this one and were currently looking for a place to cook him—somewhere with nobody else around. This was to prevent anyone from seeing and trying to steal him from them, but they themselves had already begun fighting over how to divide the portions. The husband thought that only the legs and back of the child still had meat

and wanted all of it for himself. But the wife argued that she had delivered the child they'd traded away after ten months of suffering, and so she should get first choice on the "food" they'd received. They looked like they lacked the strength to walk, yet they suddenly started to scuffle.

The child they'd traded for simply watched from the side blankly, letting them fight over the right to eat him first. His expression was numb, as if his consciousness had left him long ago.

Shen Qiao couldn't take it anymore—he went up and seized the boy. Seeing that their meal had been stolen, the couple immediately stopped scuffling with each other and lunged at Shen Qiao.

They hadn't eaten for many days. A moderately strong woman could have knocked them down easily, let alone Shen Qiao. But even after Shen Qiao brought the boy back with him, the child's expression didn't change in the slightest. Forget gratitude, he didn't even show the slightest joy at escaping with his life.

"What's your name?" asked Shen Qiao. "Would you like something to eat first?" Shen Qiao reached out to pull him closer.

But before he could touch him, the boy simply tipped forward and fell to the ground, motionless.

Shen Qiao was alarmed. He went up for a closer look and realized that the boy had been gravely ill for some time—the disease had long spread to his organs. He'd already been at death's door when the couple had been dragging him along. Even the gods couldn't have saved him. And at that moment, unable to hold out any longer, his heart finally gave out.

Whether Shen Qiao tried to save him or not made no difference to him at all.

His eyes still remained half-open, as if within him lingered a final trace of reluctance and a denouncement of the world.

Judging from the scars on his body and the ribs straining beneath his skin, this boy had probably never lived a single good day in his life. He probably never understood why he had to be born and suffer through such misery.

Shen Qiao was still for a long time, watching him without blinking. Suddenly, he reached out and passed his hand over the boy's face, closing those half-open eyes.

And yet another hand came and covered Shen Qiao's eyes, gently swabbing the wet tracks from their corners.

"You didn't even cry when Yu Ai betrayed you, but now you're crying over someone you didn't even know?"

"Everything I encountered before, whether they were setbacks or hardships, were things I could endure. But this little boy…he probably never hurt anyone. Heaven ordained his birth, and it shouldn't have been to suffer. Everyone has the right to live. No matter how difficult his life was, it should have at least shown him some hope of a way out."

Yan Wushi would have thought such words hypocritical from anyone else's mouth. Even now, he could never do the things Shen Qiao did. But somehow, unconsciously and naturally, the disdain that had welled up inside him in the beginning had changed—now, when Shen Qiao did these things, he was no longer surprised, nor did he find it strange.

"You're too naive," he said. "Who's responsible for giving him that kind of hope? Other people also need to live, and they also need to worry about themselves—why should they be kind to him?"

Shen Qiao stood up. "I was willing to be kind to him, but I was a moment too late."

"You can only save one or two people by yourself at most," Yan Wushi said indifferently. "So many people in the world are in the same state as him, yet you're indifferent to them. Isn't that hypocritical?"

"If, one day, when the turmoil ends and the land is unified, and this kind of thing still happens, then at least it will happen far less. And then more than just one or two will be saved—it will be thousands and thousands. Isn't that right?"

Yan Wushi didn't care enough to reply but instead walked to the side of the road. Using his palm as a blade, he used his internal energy to slice open a deep ditch beneath a tree. It was a perfect rectangle and of uniform depth.

Seeing what he'd done, Shen Qiao understood the meaning and smiled despite himself. "Many thanks."

He placed the little boy's corpse into the ditch, laying him flat. Then he swept dirt inside, filling it until it was level and smooth.

In these troubled times, it was fortunate if a corpse wasn't left exposed in the wilderness. If he erected a tomb marker, people might think there were funerary objects buried beneath it, and it would draw the attention of robbers.

With everything settled, Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi entered the city.

Inside the city and outside were practically two different worlds.

It was said that when Gao Wei, the Emperor of Qi, heard about the years of famine and the widespread refugees, he didn't order his subordinates to provide disaster relief. Instead, he built a "Pauper's Village" at Hualin Garden inside the capital. There, he dressed up as a beggar and told the eunuchs and maidservants to play traveling merchants and passersby so that he could experience the fun of begging for himself. Hence, when people in Yecheng talked about Hualin Garden, their faces showed no admiration for the royal garden but rather a subtle, tacit mockery.

However, even as danger loomed from the Northern Zhou army pressing ever closer to their border, the city still looked like its peaceful, carefree self—not much different from the last few times Shen Qiao had visited.

It was still the same luxurious, perfumed carriages; the same extravagant atmosphere; the long and fluttering sleeves, the brocade sashes and silk skirts. The jade hairpins and magnificent robes, the subtle fragrances as they wafted. It was an explosion of splendor as far as the eye could see—this was the face of Yecheng, the capital of Qi, a world full of glory and wealth.

At first glance, newly arrived travelers wouldn't find a single poor person. They might even grow ashamed at their own lack of wealth, thinking themselves too shabby in comparison. However, if one took a quick glance into the many alleys and nooks, they could sometimes spot a

few plainly dressed, ordinary civilians, starkly incongruent with the flood of luxury surrounding them.

Finding a couple of people in such a large city was not something that could be accomplished in one or two days. Yu Ai and his group might have taken up lodgings at a Daoist monastery, or perhaps they'd changed into ordinary robes to hide their identities. If the latter were true, it'd be like hunting for a needle at the bottom of the sea, compounding the difficulty.

The two of them parted just after entering the city. Yan Wushi didn't say where he was going, and Shen Qiao didn't ask. He only said, "Take care, Sect Leader Yan. I hope everything goes well."

"Looking for an inn to stay at?" asked Yan Wushi.

Shen Qiao thought for a moment. "I'll try searching the Daoist monasteries first. If I still can't find them, I'll just stay in one of the monasteries."

Yan Wushi nodded. "This venerable one still has business to attend to."

He didn't elaborate, just turned to leave. In the span of a blink, he'd completely vanished from Shen Qiao's sight.

Shen Qiao stood in place for a while, watching as Yan Wushi disappeared into the crowd. He smiled despite himself, then also took his leave.

He hadn't walked far when a large troop of men on horseback marched toward him. Soldiers led the way as they drove the pedestrians aside, and everyone quickly scattered off the road. No one wanted to bump into the noble behind those soldiers, lest they bring trouble onto themselves.

Shen Qiao had dodged to the side too when he heard someone behind him say curiously, "Which prince or princess is it this time?"

Another person laughed as he replied, "You're wrong. Look at the insignia! That's the Prince of Chenyang Commandery!"

"Ah!" Understanding dawned on the first man. "The Prince of Chenyang Commandery who's greatly favored by the emperor?"

"Correct," said the second in a meaningful tone. "That's him."

The Prince of Chenyang Commandery, Mu Tipo, was greatly renowned—almost everyone had heard of him. However, his fame came from the emperor, not from his own achievements or abilities.

There was also some deeply unpleasant history between Shen Qiao and this Prince of Chenyang Commandery. Because of him, Mu Tipo would never be able to have relations ever again—his loathing for Shen Qiao was probably long-standing and bone-deep. Shen Qiao wasn't afraid of him, but he was here to find someone, not cause more trouble. After hearing who it was, he backed deeper into the crowd, preparing to hide himself in a nearby shop for the time being.

But then he heard someone's surprised voice. "That's not the Prince of Chenyang Commandery?"

Shen Qiao looked back. In an unfortunate coincidence, the person riding high astride the horse was just then looking in his direction.

Their gazes met. Shen Qiao calmly turned his head away, unruffled, but the other party started slightly.

"Oh, it's not the Prince of Chenyang Commandery! He's the new favorite of the emperor. I heard that he was recommended by the Prince of Chenyang Commandery. His Majesty is very fond of him right now, even Consort Feng has to take a backseat to him!"

"Consort Feng? She's the one who…right?"

"Hehe, right! The emperor stripped her naked then let the officials pay to look at her—one thousand gold per view! *That* Consort Feng!"

The surrounding crowd followed up with a stint of knowing laughter.

With an emperor and officials like that, what hope was there for the country?

Shen Qiao thought of Yuwen Yong, who he'd met, then shook his head. He quickly dove back into the crowd and left.

Northern Qi esteemed Buddhism; therefore, as Yecheng was also a Buddhist city, there were practically no Daoist monasteries. Shen Qiao asked several passersby, but none of them knew of any in the city. It wasn't until he asked an old man that he received an answer: "There's Bailong

Monastery in the west of the city, but there's only one abbot and two young priests. Normally it's fairly lonely—few people go there."

Shen Qiao thanked the old man, and after some searching, he quickly found Bailong Monastery. From the outside, only the words "Bailong Monastery" on the wooden plaque were still crisp and legible. The rest of the building was scarred over with moss, and the roof tiles were decayed. It'd probably been many years since the place had been last cleaned and repaired.

The old man had said two young priests, but the gates were unlatched. As Shen Qiao walked all the way into the courtyard, he saw nary a shadow. He raised his voice and called out a few times. Finally, a boy priest came out, yawning.

"Why has this gentleman come?"

Shen Qiao bowed and cupped his hands. "May I ask this young Daoist priest if a group of people have come to stay in the past few days? Their leader is a young man, and following him should be a young woman and two old men. Perhaps a number of disciples as well. The young man has a red mole beneath his ear, and they may or may not be wearing Daoist robes."

The boy priest shook his head. "No, our monastery has always been cold and lonely, day and night. It's been a long time since anyone's come here!"

Shen Qiao was a little disappointed. Seeing that the sky was growing dark, he asked, "Then, are there any empty guest rooms available? This one wishes to stay the night."

"There are," said the boy priest, "but they haven't been cleaned in a while. You'd have to clean them yourself."

"Many thanks," said Shen Qiao. "As long as there's somewhere I can stay. May I ask if the abbot is here, young priest? As I'm borrowing a room from the host, I must at least thank him."

"No need," said the boy. "My master doesn't meet with outsiders, and in the end, you're only borrowing a room, not money. Whether or not you see him doesn't matter."

He led Shen Qiao through the monastery's main hall, bringing him to one of the rooms in the back courtyard. When he pushed open the doors, they were greeted with a face-full of musty air, age-old and thick with dust. The boy himself began coughing incessantly, his hand fanning hard before his nose.

"Look, it's so dirty. You really wanna sleep here?" He looked at Shen Qiao askance.

Shen Qiao gave it a brief scan. The bed was a little dirty, but there was a broom and dustcloth, along with a well right outside. It would be good enough with a quick cleaning. His lodgings hadn't been that luxurious or comfortable back when he'd been honored as the sect leader of Xuandu Mountain either.

"I'll be fine. Thank you, young priest."

Since he'd said so, the boy let him be. "We don't eat after noontime, so the stove isn't burning. If you want to eat, you'll have to cook something yourself. The kitchen has kettles and cups, but no rice or flour. If you want to buy something to eat, there's a market right across the street outside. You should go quickly though, since they'll be closing soon."

With this kind of hospitality, no wonder the monastery drew few pilgrims to stay, even though they were located in the capital. Beyond the residents simply esteeming Buddhism, it seemed that the host's attitude itself was a problem.

But Shen Qiao didn't complain: he only smiled, giving a positive reply to everything the boy said. Once the child had left, he began cleaning —spraying water, sweeping, and scrubbing the cot.

Not much later, the boy returned, excitement shining on his face. "Sir, quickly, come and look! There are so many carriages outside, all carrying so many things! They said it's all for you!"

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Chapter 44:
Chen Gong Returns the Sandwiches

“DID THEY GIVE their name?” asked Shen Qiao.

“They didn’t,” said the boy. “Hurry up and look!”

He’d grown up in the monastery and had never seen such a grand procession before. Without waiting for Shen Qiao’s answer, he was already running to get the abbot, shouting the entire way.

Shen Qiao walked to the entrance and sure enough, several carriages were parked there, and several chests were being unloaded from them.

The leader was dressed like a servant, but he didn’t seem like an ordinary servant—judging from his appearance and clothing, he was at least an attendant who served his master directly.

When the man saw Shen Qiao arrive, he took a step forward but didn’t come any closer. “May I ask if you’re Shen Qiao?”

“I am.”

“By the order of the Duke of Pengcheng County, this one comes to deliver gifts.”

Shen Qiao already had his suspicions, but still he asked, “Who is the Duke of Pengcheng County? I fear I do not know him.”

Displeasure rose to the man’s face, and he simply said, “The Duke of Pengcheng County says that you once showed him kindness, and that a drop of kindness should be repaid in abundance. Hence, he

commanded this one to deliver these gifts, and hopes that this gentleman will graciously accept them.”

Without waiting for Shen Qiao’s reply, he clapped, saying to the coachman and other servants, “Open the chests.”

Right then, the abbot of Bailong Monastery ran out with the two boy priests, ready to receive the newcomers. They didn’t have time to greet Shen Qiao before their attention was drawn away by the opening chests.

Straight away, they gasped.

Not a gasp of awe but rather because they were in disbelief.

For inside the chests wasn't gold or treasure, or silks and satins—they were crammed full of donkey-meat sandwiches.

The moment they were opened, the steaming aroma of donkey meat burst forth, wafting in their faces. All at once, the three of them gulped helplessly, their mouths watering.

The servant's expression was disdainful as he sneered, "The Duke of Pengcheng County asked this lowly one to pass these words on for him: that day, he was able to eat a couple of sandwiches by your grace. Today, he wishes to repay you tenfold. We fear these chests may not be enough—if they aren't, this lowly one will deliver a few more chests!"

Shen Qiao showed neither anger nor fear; on the contrary, he smiled. "This is enough. I was just brooding over what to do for dinner, since the monastery's stove isn't on. Many thanks to your master for his timely help—now my meals are covered for the next two days."

The servant probably hadn't expected such a reaction from Shen Qiao. He started briefly, and then the contempt on his face grew deeper. He obviously felt Shen Qiao was acting far too meek—after all, the reason his master was using this method to repay Shen Qiao must have been because the man had once offended him.

With this in mind, the man took Shen Qiao to be of little consequence and nodded. "Then this lowly one will return and report to my master."

He made a gesture, and the chests around him were tipped, dumping the donkey-meat sandwiches out onto the ground.

Alarmed, the abbot and two boys cried out, "What are you doing! The sandwiches were perfectly fine and they're all dirty now!"

The servant laughed. "The master said to deliver the sandwiches, but he never said to deliver the chests!"

The donkey-meat sandwiches spilled all over the ground, their juices gushing out. A swarm of insects was quickly drawn in by the aroma, and they buzzed around the heap. Even if the priests had wanted to pick them up, clean them off, and eat them, they didn't dare to now. All they could do

was choke down their anger. Sorrow written all over their faces, they stared at the sandwiches.

Shen Qiao's smile finally faded, and his expression darkened a touch.

Back in that dilapidated temple, Chen Gong couldn't even afford a single sandwich. One hot meal had been enough to delight him. And yet today, he could go this far to satisfy a passing caprice. Could power and glory truly cloud one's eyes? Or was one's environment truly potent enough to change their personality?

"Wait."

The servant paused in his steps and looked back. "Does this gentleman have further instructions?"

"Finish these sandwiches before you leave."

The servant burst out laughing. "This gentleman jests! These are the master's gifts for this gentleman, how can we eat them? Please, take your time and enjoy!"

He turned around, but before he'd taken more than a couple of steps, his gloating smile quickly transformed into horror.

Because from his wrist came an unbearable pain.

And Shen Qiao, who'd been standing ten steps from him just a moment before, was suddenly right in front of his eyes.

The servant's face twisted in agony. "Let go… Let go!"

"Food is bestowed by the heavens—it must be treasured," Shen Qiao said severely. "There are many people starving outside the city, so I must trouble you to eat these sandwiches before you leave."

The servant was shocked, fearful, and angry, all at once. "How dare you! Do you know who we are?! The Duke of Pengcheng County is His Majesty's favorite…"

Shen Qiao's expression was indifferent. "I don't know any Duke of Pengcheng County. If you don't eat these, none of you will leave today."

Still, some simply refused to accept their fate—one of the coachmen turned and ran. He hadn't managed three steps before abruptly falling face-first to the ground, completely unable to move.

“Will you eat?” asked Shen Qiao.

“You’ll regret this, Shen Qiao,” said the servant. “If you dare humiliate me, one day my master will pay you back a thousandfold!”

“Will you eat?”

“You wouldn’t dare—” His voice transformed into a scream.

He screamed wretchedly, and in an instant, his facade of bravado transformed into an expression of anguish. Shen Qiao was only holding his wrist, but no one knew what technique he’d used—though the servant’s wrist showed no sign of fracture or injury, his face was contorted in unbearable agony. A chill ran down every onlooker’s spine.

“Will you eat?” asked Shen Qiao.

His tone was as calm and placid as ever, but his eyes shifted from the servant, turning onto the rest.

Everyone whom his gaze swept across bowed their heads in turn, not daring to meet his eyes.

By this point, the servant was thoroughly cowed. Even his voice had changed completely, and now it trembled as he spoke. “We must let this gentleman know—our master only asked us to deliver the sandwiches, he didn’t tell this lowly one to dump them out! It was…it was this lowly one’s own idea! This lowly one begs your forgiveness—he knows your great self is magnanimous, so please don’t hold it against him!”

“If you don’t want me to hold it against you, then finish the sandwiches,” said Shen Qiao. “Otherwise, I fear that when I settle accounts with your master, he’ll be sure to take out his anger on you. You should consider things carefully.”

The servant longed to weep, but all he could do was get down on all fours, pick up the sandwiches, and begin eating.

The fallen sandwiches were already cold, and as they entered the servant’s mouth, he could feel the grit and sand mixed in them. Ever since he’d started serving Chen Gong, he’d been eating better than most well-off families did—never had there been food like this, that even the manor’s dogs would refuse. He was on the verge of tears from the very first bite. But

Shen Qiao was still watching him, so he had to swallow it, mouthful by mouthful. He looked like he was being force-fed poison.

When he noticed his fellows were just staring at him blankly, he roared, “Hurry up and help me eat!”

The very fiber of their being screamed in reluctance, but their master valued the servant greatly, so all they could do was crouch down alongside him and start eating as well.

Ever since he’d become the emperor’s new favorite, the Duke of Pengcheng County had been the talk of the town—even the monastery’s abbot had heard of him. When he saw Shen Qiao treat these people with such complete and utter lack of courtesy he gaped, astonished.

One of the boy priests pulled on the corner of his master’s robe. “Shifu,” he whispered, “won’t we get dragged into the middle of things if the Duke of Whatever County returns to settle scores?”

The abbot twisted around to look at him and dropped his voice low. “Shut up! Don’t you see how amazing our visitor’s martial arts are?!”

Shen Qiao heard him but pretended not to. After each man had finished about a dozen sandwiches, they cried miserably that they truly couldn’t eat anymore, begging Shen Qiao to let them go.

However, there were at least a few dozen sandwiches still on the ground. Shen Qiao shook his head. “If I let you bring them back with you, I’m sure you’ll throw them out along the way. So you must finish them all here, or you can forget about leaving.”

The servant was trembling in terror. “Sir, this lowly one’s master is still awaiting his report!”

“If you don’t get back in time, he’ll just dispatch more people here. Wouldn’t that give you more mouths to help you eat?”

The servant dared not make another a sound. Agonized, he lowered his head and went back to eating.

All the way from evening until nightfall, the dozen or so men ate and ate, gobbling and gulping down the food. It wasn’t until their stomachs were stretched round and taut, their faces ashen, that Shen Qiao finally let them stop.

It was like they'd been granted great amnesty—they could barely stand up straight and had to support each other as they respectfully came before Shen Qiao, begging for forgiveness.

"Go back and tell your master that I'm only passing through and won't be staying for long. I'll leave tomorrow, so there's no need to come here and harass the abbot."

The servant forced a smile. "Surely Shen-gongzi jests! How could we dare?"

In truth, Shen Qiao had seen right through him. That was exactly what his plan had been.

Shen Qiao didn't say anything more and let them leave.

Once the fiends had walked some distance away, the abbot finally came up to Shen Qiao and sighed. "Sir, you've brought quite a bit of trouble to our monastery. We've always lived as recluses and never caused any problems. And yet today, misfortune has befallen us. Just what did we do to deserve this?"

"You need not worry," said Shen Qiao apologetically. "This has nothing to do with you. Tomorrow, I'll find the person in question and clear things up. Then they won't come looking for you anymore."

The abbot was still somewhat displeased. "That'd be for the best!"

Shen Qiao fished several copper coins from his sleeve and handed them to him. "I've caused you a lot of trouble. I don't have much on me, but please accept my token of sincerity—take it as money for incense. I hope it's enough?"

The abbot's expression finally lightened a little. He glanced at his two disciples, both of whom were looking back at him. With a cough, he gathered his sleeves and tucked the coins into his hand. "Just barely. It's late and the cold winds are harsh. Please come inside and rest."

Shen Qiao smiled and went inside with them.

Those two boy priests had thought that there'd be donkey-meat sandwiches to enjoy. Instead, they'd been put through a mess—no sandwiches, but at least they'd gotten a good show out of it. While the abbot worried that they'd offended someone, the boy priests were bubbling

over with excitement. Especially the one who'd earlier received Shen Qiao so listlessly—his attitude had completely changed, and he was practically glowing as he gazed at Shen Qiao.

"Shen-langjun, do you know who's behind him? He's the Duke of Pengcheng County, the emperor's new favorite official. I heard that for him, the emperor was even willing to…"

The rest of his sentence disappeared, cut off by the pain of the abbot's slap on the back of his head.

"What are you saying at your age!" the abbot scolded.

The boy cradled his head, feeling wounded and sulky. "But, Shifu, you're the one who told us!"

The abbot rolled his eyes. "Hurry up and cook already, your shifu's about to starve to death!"

"Didn't your esteemed self say not to eat after noon?"

"That's on a normal day, when we're living our peaceful, reclusive lives! Of course two meals are enough then. But today we got thrown into hot water, and for what! I'm practically starving from anger! If you don't want to eat, then at least think about your shifu!"

"I've only heard of anger making you full, not hungry…" the boy mumbled. The abbot raised his hand again, and he quickly darted away. "I'm going to go cook!"

"Wretched disciple!" Though displeased, the abbot patted the other boy's head. "Chuyi's always running amok. Shiwu is still the best behaved."

Shiwu smiled shyly, then raised his head to ask Shen Qiao, "Shen-langjun, our monastery doesn't have many ingredients, so we can only make simple things. Please forgive us. Would your honored self like to eat noodles or rice?"

The abbot was aghast. "You! Child of bad luck! I just praised you and you're already strutting about! That flour is for New Year's!"

Just as the words left him, the abbot knew he'd said too much. He quickly glanced at Shen Qiao, then awkwardly shut his mouth.

Shiwu laughed. “Shen-langjun is our guest, and Shifu is always teaching us to mind our manners. I’ll go and help out shixiong!”

He scampered off before the abbot could reply.

“A child of bad luck!” the abbot muttered, thinking that he’d really been awfully unfortunate today. Not only were there no donkey-meat sandwiches, but they were even going to rob him of the tiny bit of flour he’d saved.

As if sensing his thoughts, Shen Qiao fished out a couple more coppers from his sleeve. He smiled as he handed them over. “I deeply apologize for making you spend so much on me!”

“Hey, hey, that’s not what I meant!” The abbot wasn’t shameless enough to accept the money and pushed it back toward him. At this close distance, he finally realized that there was something wrong with Shen Qiao’s eyes. “Your eyes…?”

“It’s due to an old illness,” said Shen Qiao. “They’re better in the daytime, but I can’t see very well at night.”

“Ah,” said the abbot. “Such a pity!”

He didn’t spend more time on the topic of eyesight. “By the way,” he asked, “how did this gentleman offend the Duke of Pengcheng County?”

Shen Qiao briefly told him about meeting Chen Gong while they were both in poverty and how they’d traveled together. When the abbot heard about Chen Gong bringing Mu Tipo to look for Shen Qiao, and how he’d wanted to pass his predicament on to Shen Qiao by recommending him to Mu Tipo, he couldn’t stop himself from cursing. “Repaying kindness with enmity! Shameless bastard!”

Thinking about the scene he’d just witnessed, he sighed. “If you want to look for him, Shen-langjun, make sure you make adequate preparations. A glance was enough to see that the servant was a vile man. He’s sure to exaggerate the events in his report to make Chen Gong resent you even more.”

“I’m grateful for the abbot’s reminder,” said Shen Qiao. “But there’s one thing I still want to ask. Has the abbot seen a group of people these days? There are two seniors among them, while the rest are young men and

women, all of them very good-looking. They may or may not be wearing Daoist robes, but they should be carrying swords."

Although he'd asked the boy priest earlier, he couldn't quite bring himself to give up and had decided to ask again.

The abbot thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I have not. Daoism isn't popular in Yecheng, though there are many Buddhist shrines and temples. When it comes to Daoist priests…other than our Bailong Monastery here, there aren't many other monasteries. If they wished to stay in one, it's almost certain they'd come here. And if they didn't come here, they definitely wouldn't go to another one. Perhaps they've changed their clothes and gone to stay at an inn. However, Shen-langjun, if you want to find someone, you can't do it like this. If they were to deliberately hide their tracks, or not enter the city at all, it'd be very easy for you to miss them. Besides, are you certain that they've been heading north?"

Shen Qiao smiled wryly. "That's true. I'm only clinging to a strand of hope myself."

As they were talking, a boyish voice came from the kitchen. "Shifu, Shen-langjun, the food is ready!"

The abbot automatically quickened his steps, then remembered that Shen Qiao was still beside him. He stopped himself abruptly and smiled at him, embarrassed. "Come, come. Let's go eat!"

Dinner couldn't have been any simpler—flour and water, already in the monastery, had been kneaded and rolled into noodles. There wasn't even a drop of oil in the dish, let alone any meat. Just plain noodles left dry, a smattering of chopped vegetables for toppings, and some homemade pickled radishes mixed in. But for the three priests, it was enough to make their eyes shine.

The abbot gulped down a mouthful of saliva, then said to the junior disciple, "Serve our guest first."

"Yes, Shifu." The disciple was an honest server—he immediately piled Shen Qiao's bowl full of noodles, pickled radishes, and vegetables until it nearly crested into a little peak. The sight of this pained the abbot so much that he just had to object. "Enough, enough! If you give the guest any more, he won't be able to finish!"

Shen Qiao smiled in agreement. “Yes, a little is enough for me. Don’t give me too much!”

While they were playing a game of deference, another series of knocks came from the monastery’s gates outside. In the quiet of the night, the sound was crisp and striking, and their hearts thumped despite themselves.

The two boy priests looked at each other. “Why a guest when it’s already so late?”

“It couldn’t be that bunch from earlier, back to make trouble, right?”

“Shifu, should we pretend we didn’t hear anything?”

The abbot was also somewhat perturbed. “Why don’t we wait a moment? Perhaps he’ll stop knocking after a while.”

“It can’t be them, Shifu,” the senior disciple said doubtfully. “If they were back to pick a fight, they’d have just gotten in by kicking the gates down. They’d at least smash the door in. Why would they just keep knocking like this? It couldn’t be…some kind of ghost?”

“Enough with the nonsense!” snapped the abbot. “You should learn something useful instead of constantly listening to those absurd ghost tales they tell beneath the bridge. I’m going to go see just who is causing a disturbance this late at night!”

“I’ll go,” said Shen Qiao. “You three go ahead and eat. No need to worry.”

The abbot stood with him. “No, it’ll be hard on your eyes…”

Shen Qiao pressed the abbot down by his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m used to it now—I can still make things out. Just lend me a lantern.”

The junior disciple brought him a lantern straight away, and the abbot sat back down. On the inside, he was fretting over his cooling noodles, but his words were courteous. “Be careful, then. If something’s not right, call us for help!”

“All right,” said Shen Qiao. “You eat first.”

Carrying the lantern, he walked toward the entrance. Bailong Monastery was quite large, and he could still faintly feel the magnificence

of its former years. But with the passage of time, it'd fallen into disrepair, and now the mighty monastery had only three priests left to watch it. Walking through those desolate halls in the night, a lament couldn't help but stir in one's heart.

Shen Qiao had also thought that Chen Gong had sent more troublemakers their way, but when he opened the door, the pitch-black darkness greeted him with neither clamor nor commotion—instead, there was a lone man standing there with his hands clasped behind his back, his figure and pose overwhelmingly familiar.

He didn't even need to raise the lantern to know who the man was. Surprised, he blurted out, "Sect Leader Yan?"

"What," said Yan Wushi. "Not happy to see me?"

Under the light of the moon, a sincere, welcoming smile bloomed on Shen Qiao's face, his lantern still in hand. "Of course I am. Hurry up and come in. Have you eaten?"

Yan Wushi didn't mean to answer such an inane question, but as he opened his mouth, he somehow found himself saying: "Not yet."

Shen Qiao laughed. "Then you're just in time. Hurry inside, the priests have boiled some noodles!"

He could still make things out in the daytime, but when night fell, his eyesight grew worse. Even with the lantern, he couldn't see well. That, combined with the monastery's unfamiliar layout, made him stumble a little as he brought Yan Wushi inside. He nearly fell face-down right there.

This was the martial artist who'd killed Huo Xijing, who'd forced Duan Wenyang to withdraw, yet he'd tripped over a couple of stone steps. If word got out, people would split their sides laughing.

Luckily, an arm stretched over just in time to wrap around Shen Qiao's waist and stop his fall.

"You're in a bit of a rush today. That's unusual," said Yan Wushi.

Shen Qiao stifled a laugh and smiled but didn't follow up. "The noodles are getting cold," he said instead. "You haven't eaten yet—let's hurry."

But by the time he brought Yan Wushi into the kitchen, the abbot was already slurping up the last noodle. “Shen-langjun, you returned too late,” he said, rubbing his bulging belly. “The noodles are already gone.”

Shen Qiao introduced Yan Wushi to them. “This is my friend, surname Yan.”

The junior disciple stood. “Shen-langjun, I left a bowl for your esteemed self. You can share it with Yan-langjun.”

The abbot rolled his eyes at him. “You busybody!”

He’d been about to complain about getting a second visitor, that they’d only saved one bowl, but when he saw Yan Wushi standing behind Shen Qiao, he found himself swallowing down his words. His stern abbot face almost slipped entirely in front of Yan Wushi, and he even began to feel anxious. In the end, he could only stand, dropping a “Take your time eating,” before leaving in a hurry.

The junior disciple, who had brought over the bowl of noodles for Shen Qiao some time ago, looked awkwardly at Yan Wushi. “There’s only one bowl,” he said.

The noodles had already begun to clump together. It was unlikely Yan Wushi would eat such a thing, even if someone begged him to.

But to the members of Bailong Monastery, it was a precious bit of food that they’d been saving for several months—it had even been set aside for the New Year. And yet they’d brought it out early for Shen Qiao’s arrival.

Shen Qiao thanked the boy, then said to Yan Wushi, “Shall I share with you?”

“No need.”

Shen Qiao laughed. “Although the noodles are a bit cold, their pickled radish is quite spectacular. You should try some.”

Yan Wushi was particular about cleanliness, so Shen Qiao washed the chopsticks first before turning to the pickled radish and chopped vegetables in the bowl, selecting those that hadn’t touched the noodles. He fished them out and placed them in the bowl in front of Yan Wushi, then poured some sauce over the remaining dry, clumpy noodles and began to eat.

Yan Wushi furrowed his brow, staring at the half-full bowl of vegetables and pickled radish before him. It was a long time before he picked up his chopsticks and gave them a taste.

The flavor wasn't as awful as he'd imagined.

"Has Sect Leader Yan concluded his business?" asked Shen Qiao.

"Not yet," was all Yan Wushi replied. He spoke nothing about whether he'd even met the person, or why he wasn't finished, and Shen Qiao didn't ask.

But then Yan Wushi changed the topic entirely. "Were you happy to see me just now?"

Shen Qiao started, then nodded and smiled. "Yes. I'd thought that once we'd parted, it would be a long time before we'd meet again. I didn't expect it to happen so soon. Is that not something to be happy about?"

"Just now, when you introduced me, you called me your friend." Yan Wushi ran his finger along the edge of his bowl, his expression amused.

The bowl was of very poor craftsmanship, and because it'd been in use for a while, it was covered in a thick layer of grime, the type that could no longer be washed off.

"Yes. Calling you my friend makes things simpler when we're out and about. People won't question it."

Yan Wushi stared straight at him. "Oh, and what do you think? Do you see my venerable self as your friend, deep down inside?"

"Having the same master, harboring the same ambitions, such are enough to make people friends. Sect Leader Yan and I share neither master nor ambition, but you saved my life, and that connection is by no means a shallow one. What's more, we've spent quite a bit of time traveling together. Surely all that is enough to make us friends."

"Do you not fear people saying that you're beholden to the Demon Lord, that you've abandoned yourself to degeneracy?"

Shen Qiao laughed. "I know what I'm doing—that's good enough. Why should I care what others think? The things I've seen and heard since leaving the mountain have moved me deeply. Even more, they made me understand that the path I'd insisted on, the Dao I practiced in the remote

mountains, was but a trivial one. Sect Leader Yan assists the Lord of Zhou so he can one day unite the lands and bring peace to the world, so the common folk need not be refugees and exchange their children for food, so that as long they have hands and feet, they can work and reap the rewards. What Sect Leader Yan practices—that's probably the true, great Dao."

Yan Wushi sneered. "No need to flatter this venerable one so. Yuwen Yong and I are both in it for ourselves. Everything I've done, I did because I wanted to do it—never out of consideration for other people."

"Even if something was done with wicked intentions, as long as it leads to good results, that would still count as attaining the Dao, would it not?"

Yan Wushi stared at him unswervingly for a moment. After a long time, he said, "And so, we're friends?"

Shen Qiao nodded and smiled. "If Sect Leader Yan doesn't disdain me for trying for someone out of my league."

A strange expression flitted across Yan Wushi's face, but only for an instant. Before Shen Qiao could get a clear grasp on what it was, Yan Wushi had resumed his languid, nonchalant manner. "This monastery is truly rather crude. Does it even have a place to sleep?"

Shen Qiao laughed. "I can only ask you to suffer through sharing a room with me for now."

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Chapter 45:
Friends

IN TRUTH, unless Yan Wushi was willing to sleep in the abbot's bed or simply leave in search of somewhere else to stay, then staying in a room with Shen Qiao was his only option.

But in any case, Shen Qiao had just cleaned, and the monastery's young disciples had sunned the blankets two days prior—the fresh, sweet smell of sunshine was still on them.

The bed was meant for one person, and squeezing in a second would definitely feel somewhat cramped. "You sleep," Shen Qiao told him. "I'll sit and meditate. Catching a few winks afterward will be enough for me."

The room was very crude and humble: moonlight trickled in through the cracks in the window paper, and the night breeze slipped in alongside it. Fortunately, it wasn't too cold this time of the year, and both of them were top-class martial artists—catching a chill wasn't a worry.

Shen Qiao sat cross-legged, his back like an evergreen pine or bamboo, resilient and enduring. It was already early summer, and little by little, his clothes had grown lighter—the outline of his waist was faintly visible through the fabric.

Time slipped by in drips and trickles. The moon climbed high, coolly tinting the rippling well water.

Yan Wushi stared at Shen Qiao's figure from behind. Then, without warning, his finger darted forward quick as lighting, striking right at the center of Shen Qiao's back.

Shen Qiao was immersed in meditation, having entered a deeply profound state. Most martial artists, unless they were in secluded cultivation, kept a portion of their awareness on watch for danger, especially when they were in a strange environment. This was to guard against an ambush. But Shen Qiao had only been guarding against outside enemies—he'd never expected Yan Wushi to launch a sneak attack against him.

That tiny sliver of vigilance quickly pulled him out of his meditation, but the significant gap between their martial arts and the recent closeness they'd shared combined so that, by the time Shen Qiao reacted, various important acupoints on his back were already sealed. He was completely unable to move.

Yan Wushi caressed Shen Qiao's cheek, and a quiet sigh escaped him. "A-Qiao, why are you always so trusting of others?"

Shen Qiao frowned. "I thought we were friends."

Yan Wushi smiled thinly. "You have only yourself to blame. If you hadn't talked about being friends, I might have waited a little longer before moving against you. Just what kind of person do you think my venerable self is? Why would I need someone like you—some down-and-out laughingstock who can't even recover his martial arts, who's been exiled from his sect—to be my friend?"

Shen Qiao stopped talking.

Yan Wushi picked him up in his arms and left the room, heading right outside without further regard for Shen Qiao.

His footsteps remained featherlight, almost weightless, despite the person he carried in his arms. Beneath the moonlight, he glided across the fallen leaves soundlessly, his robes and sleeves billowing in the wind. His movements were peerlessly beautiful and poised—nobody who saw him would have believed that such a celestial being could be the Demon Lord whose name inspired such fear.

"Why don't you ask where we're going?"

Shen Qiao didn't reply. Anyone who didn't know better would think him mute.

Yan Wushi dropped his chin and looked at him. Shen Qiao had simply closed his eyes.

He couldn't help but laugh, saying, "I'm bringing you to see someone. I'll tell you a story while we go. Since we haven't met this someone yet, I'll start with the story.

"Ten years ago, when I'd just begun obtaining the *Zhuyang Strategy*, I held it in contempt. At the time, I didn't believe that any martial arts could

surpass the *Fenglin Scriptures*. Even though I'd lost to Qi Fengge, I thought it was an issue with the person, not the martial arts themselves. After all, the first leader of Riyue Sect had attained the tenth and final stage of the *Fenglin Scriptures*. In his time, no one was his match—not from the Daoist or the Confucian sects. Legend says he lived to be a hundred and twenty years old, and at the end of his life he broke through the zenith—he achieved godhood and returned to the void, his spirit freed from his body.

"But later, I read the records Riyue Sect left behind. There, I discovered that the legends were wrong. Although he lived past one hundred and twenty years, his spirit hadn't been freed by his ascension to a higher realm—he died from a qi deviation that destroyed his body. The *Fenglin Scriptures* are incredible, but hidden within them is a fatal flaw. To put it simply, a person's body is like a vessel. As their internal energy strengthens, the vessel is constantly remolded to adapt to their martial growth. So the more powerful a martial artist is, the stronger their meridians are."

Shen Qiao still didn't speak, but the expression on his face implied that he was listening.

"But the opposite is true for the *Fenglin Scriptures*. The more powerful one becomes martially, the more restrictions it places on their body. When the 'vessel' can no longer keep up with their martial arts, the body ruptures and they die."

Finally, Shen Qiao spoke. "The flaw you speak of exists in all martial arts. The martial path is never-ending, but a person's aptitude is determined at birth, and their life span is limited as well. If they keep climbing ever-higher, they'll eventually find themselves in this predicament. My shizun, too, failed in his secluded cultivation and passed away because of this."

Although his martial prowess couldn't compare to before, his insight was still intact. He had no problem discussing such things.

"That's true," said Yan Wushi. "If he'd been willing to stop, the lurking peril wouldn't exist. But in the case of the Fenglin Scriptures, even if you stop practicing them, the harm to your body will still grow worse and worse. So, I thought of the *Zhuyang Strategy*—if I could merge the martial arts from different disciplines, then perhaps I'd achieve an unexpected result."

“But you failed.”

“I failed,” Yan Wushi smiled faintly. “In my eagerness to succeed, I planted the lurking peril of qi deviation inside myself.”

Abruptly, Shen Qiao frowned. “If the *Fenglin Scriptures* have such a flaw, won’t all the members of Huanyue Sect and the other two branches who cultivate with it find themselves in the same predicament?”

Yan Wushi sputtered out a laugh and finally paused in his steps. He placed Shen Qiao down on the ground. “A-Qiao, oh A-Qiao, you always surprise me. I was thinking you’d ask me why I’m telling all this, but no: you’re still worrying about whether other people will live or die. Relax, only those who cultivate to a certain level will realize this flaw. And those who can cultivate past the ninth stage, like me, have very few in the jianghu to match them. Even if they do know of the problem, they’d be unwilling to abandon this set of martial arts.

“My story is finished,” he said. “Do you have any thoughts?”

Shen Qiao shook his head.

Yan Wushi seemed to find his reaction dull; he was about to say something when the sound of laughter drifted to them from afar. “Sect Leader Yan is just as magnificent as ever. How I’ve missed you!”

The voice seemed both near and far, as if it came from over the horizon but was also right next to one’s ear. There was an indescribable seductiveness to the voice—when Shen Qiao heard it, he was suddenly overcome with an ominous feeling.

“Sang Jingxing,” Yan Wushi said coldly, “Are you trying to humiliate yourself by using ‘Demonic Persuasion’ on me?”

The newcomer laughed. As if space itself had shrunk down to mere inches, he walked up to them from afar in the span of just a few steps.

Sang Jingxing’s reputation in the jianghu was far worse than Yan Wushi’s, but he was a terrifying martial artist, so few were willing to confront him openly. They’d rather force down their words and keep the peace.

The most obvious example was what had happened a couple of years ago with Xian Province’s “Mad Blade the Matchless,” Ren Yin. His fair,

lovely youngest daughter had inadvertently drawn Sang Jingxing's interest, and Sang Jingxing demanded to take her as his disciple. Everyone knew that this was only an excuse to satisfy his endless search for girls to use in his parasitic pair cultivation practices. Ren Yin normally had an aggressive, fiery temper, but in the end, he didn't dare resist. He willingly bore the public's mockery and humiliation and handed his youngest daughter over, then withdrew from the jianghu with his family. He never involved himself with it ever again. Rumor said that only a few years after the daughter entered Hehuan Sect, Sang Jingxing and various high-ranking men in the sect grew tired of playing with her. He tossed her to his disciple Huo Xijing, who skinned off her face to put on one of his wooden dolls. It became part of his collection.

But then Yan Wushi had reemerged in the jianghu, and he was far more imperious than Sang Jingxing. So the public's attention was drawn away by Yan Wushi, and they gradually forgot how cruel and terrifying Sang Jingxing was.

As Cui Youwang's disciple, Sang Jingxing was never someone to be looked down upon. He concealed his ambitions beneath a frivolous surface—everyone expected him to happily settle into a life as Yuan Xiuxiu's intimate confidant, helping her manage the workings of Hehuan Sect. In truth, the conflict between the two had been brewing in Hehuan Sect for some time, but Yuan Xiuxiu couldn't do anything to Sang Jingxing, and Sang Jingxing couldn't kill Yuan Xiuxiu at the moment. Their only option was to hold their noses while maintaining the facade of camaraderie for the time being.

Although he was naturally tall and strapping, his face was extraordinarily, delicately beautiful. His skin was even finer and smoother than a woman's, his eyes liquid and soulful. The only misfortune was how frigid and sinister his gaze was—it made everyone afraid to meet it.

A smile hung on his lips as he greeted Yan Wushi. "I heard that Zhou intends to invade Qi. Is it true that it made Yuan Xiuxiu so anxious, she went to find Sect Leader Yan, hoping you'd help her kill me?"

Yuan Xiuxiu would have been astounded to hear him say this. It was supposed to have been a secret plot—no one had known about her going to Yan Wushi. Yet, somehow, the news had been leaked.

“That’s right,” said Yan Wushi.

“Then did Sect Leader Yan come here to kill me today?”

“I’m delivering someone to you.”

Sang Jingxing’s eyes fell to Shen Qiao. “Who’s he? Mm, he’s quite good-looking.”

“Shen Qiao.”

Sang Jingxing narrowed his eyes, and in an instant his relaxed and careless gaze became razor-sharp. “The one who killed Huo Xijing, *that* Shen Qiao?”

“Correct.”

Abruptly, Sang Jingxing burst out laughing. “I heard that Sect Leader Yan was ardently involved with him! Why are you suddenly willing to hand him over to me? I’m not a merciful man! If you end up wanting him back, it’ll be too late once I break him!”

“As soon as he’s in your hands, you can do whatever you want with him. I won’t involve my venerable self ever again.”

With this promise, Sang Jinxing’s grin noticeably widened. While Shen Qiao obviously wasn’t one of the teenage boys or girls he usually preferred, the man was blessed with good looks. More importantly, even a rotten boat had useful nails—Shen Qiao was Qi Fengge’s disciple. His martial arts and status might have plummeted, but the foundations of his martial arts were still there. Absorbing every last drop of Shen Qiao’s martial abilities after he was done using him—that wasn’t a bad idea.

“So Sect Leader Yan is going to give him to me, just like that? No conditions attached?”

“Return this venerable one’s sword,” said Yan Wushi.

Sang Jingxing hadn’t been expecting that. He was taken aback, then burst out laughing. “Unfortunately, I didn’t bring it with me today! I hope you won’t mind if I send someone else over with it later?”

That sword was called Taihua—it was the sword Yan Wushi used to wield. It had been taken from him after he lost to Cui Youwang, and when

Cui Youwang died, the sword naturally fell into the hands of his disciple, Sang Jingxing.

“That’s fine,” agreed Yan Wushi.

Sang Jingxing probed further. “I thought, what with Sect Leader Yan’s grand martial accomplishments, it shouldn’t make any difference whether you have a sword or not. Why do you want Taihua returned all of a sudden?”

Sang Jingxing was harboring a small shred of fearful caution for Yan Wushi’s martial prowess. He wouldn’t speak so courteously otherwise.

“What’s mine will be mine, even after a hundred years,” said Yan Wushi coolly. “The only difference is whether I want it back or not.”

Sang Jingxing smiled understandingly, then went for some half-sincere teasing. “I’ve been hearing for a while now that Sect Leader Yan and Shen Qiao were glued at the hip, like a celestial couple! To think that Shen Qiao is only worth a sword to you. It’s enough to make one sigh!”

Shen Qiao’s eyes stayed closed while they spoke. He neither opened them nor raised his head, his expression so calm and placid it was as if the entire conversation had nothing to do with him.

“Yuan Xiuxiu came to this venerable one openly to discuss killing you. However, she’s also been dallying with the Göktürks in secret. What are you going to do?”

A flash of anger flickered across Sang Jingxing’s face, but then he resumed his smile. “That bitch has always been a double-crossing backstabber—it’s not news to me. When and where did Sect Leader Yan agree to meet with her?”

“The sixth of June, three in the afternoon,” said Yan Wushi. “Yichixue Temple, east of the city. She said you like stopping by there.”

Sang Jingxing raised his brow. “Not bad, she truly does know my interests inside and out.”

From the name Yichixue,[18] it was obvious it wasn’t a proper temple but private property disguised as one. Lately, Sang Jingxing had taken a liking to a new type of game. He’d find some girls, shave their heads, dress them up as young nuns, and have them live in the temple. Then he would

enter the temple acting out the role of a rapist and play with the girls to his heart's content. One session usually lasted more than half a day. It was supposed to be a secret of secrets, but if he could keep track of Yuan Xiuxiu's movements, then Yuan Xiuxiu could naturally be informed of his as well.

Sang Jingxing laughed. "Then I must humbly invite Sect Leader Yan to come and see the show when the time arrives. Since that bitch wants to kill me, she can't blame me for putting aside old affections."

Yan Wushi had no interest in the feud between the two, but a unified, powerful Hehuan Sect would of course do him no good. What Yuan Xiuxiu and Sang Jingxing were doing now, slaughtering one another, was exactly what he wanted to see, so he didn't mind stoking the fires of their conflict.

He bent down and grasped Shen Qiao by the chin. "Do you still take me for a friend?"

Shen Qiao said nothing.

All of a sudden, Yan Wushi laughed. “Ah, A-Qiao, you really are far too naive. How many times have you been mistreated? How did you manage to forget it all so soon? I told you very early on that the only reason I saved you was because I wanted an opponent. But, truly, you’ve disappointed me terribly. I showed you a tiny bit of kindness, and you latched on to it, refusing to let go. Did the betrayal by Yu Ai and the rest make you yearn for more friendship and affection?”

Perhaps it was the breath accompanying his words, fanning toward Shen Qiao, but Shen Qiao’s eyelashes trembled slightly. His face, however, remained completely blank. Perhaps the sheer despair had killed his heart completely, or perhaps he simply had no interest in answering Yan Wushi’s question.

“People as naive as you are doomed to live short lives,” said Yan Wushi. “Without Xuandu Mountain, without Qi Fengge’s radiance, you’re nothing, and you’re capable of nothing. You can’t recover your martial arts, nor can you resolve my doubts. If you’re willing to enter Huanyue Sect and cultivate with the *Fenglin Scriptures*, then my venerable self may still grant you a chance to survive.”

Shen Qiao finally opened his eyes. “The reason I’m met with betrayal after betrayal isn’t because I’m naive,” he said evenly. “It’s because I believe that kindness will always exist. If there were no fools like me, where would Sect Leader Yan find your pleasure?”

Yan Wushi burst into loud laughter. “Interesting words!”

He said to Shen Qiao, “My venerable self doesn’t need friends. Only one kind of person is qualified to stand as my equal: an opponent. And you? You no longer qualify.”

At that, Yan Wushi rose, then threw Shanhe Tongbei into Shen Qiao’s arms. “A-Qiao,” he said gently. “Pray for yourself.”

Sang Jingxing watched their exchange, smiling, with absolutely no intention of stopping them or intervening. It wasn’t until Yan Wushi left that he clicked his tongue. “How does it feel, being abandoned?”

Shen Qiao closed his eyes and went silent, as before.

He was already a fish in a net, primed for slaughter—Sang Jingxing wasn't in any hurry to get started.

It was a pleasant surprise to him that he'd caught Shen Qiao. The other man was a shadow of his former self, and there were no great benefits to be gotten from him—plus he wasn't Sang Jingxing's type. But the fact that he was Qi Fengge's disciple and the former sect leader of Xuandu Mountain was enough to excite Sang Jingxing.

When he thought about Shen Qiao crying and begging for mercy beneath him, or imagined himself humiliating Shen Qiao before the disciples in Hehuan Sect, Sang Jingxing's smile grew all the wider.

"This is the sword Shanhe Tongbei that Qi Fengge once used, right? Yes, it is, I still remember. Your master used this sword to defeat me once. But I was shameless enough to kneel and beg for mercy, so in the end he let me go. Even today there's a scar on my back so deep you can see the bones beneath! If he knew that his disciple would fall into my hands today, would he regret not killing me back then?"

Sang Jingxing stroked Shen Qiao's face. "Which hand did you use to kill Huo Xijing? Don't be afraid, I won't kill you. Once I tire of playing with you, I'll chop off your hand and offer it to my poor disciple's memory. Then I'll do what Gao Wei did and strip off all your clothes so that everyone can admire the shameful performance of Xuandu Mountain's former sect leader. How about it?"

Under the moonlight, Shen Qiao's face shone cold and pale, without even a trace of emotion. He looked like a white jade sculpture—beautiful, but fragile.

But the more he acted that way, the higher Sang Jingxing's interest surged.

His entire life, Sang Jingxing's favorite thing to do was to utterly destroy beautiful things. To make them so filthy and dirty that they could only struggle in the darkness, miring themselves in it.

"However, Consort Feng Xiaolin charges ten thousand gold per glance. You won't be able to do the same, so why don't we tentatively set the price at ten gold? I'm sure many people will still be willing to pay for a glimpse of you so wretched. When the time comes, do you think Yan Wushi

will come watch too?” he said, unhurried. Then, as if he thought he’d provoked his prey enough, he reached out to grab Shanhe Tongbei.

Sang Jingxing cared little for swords, since his martial arts didn’t rely on one. But this was once the sword of the number one martial artist in all the land, so it had a special significance. If released into the jianghu, it would be a legendary weapon that people would fight for. Sang Jingxing touched his fingers to the hilt. “If you’re willing to submit to me nicely, I might be a little gentler…”

But at that moment, something unforeseen happened.

Without warning, a sword glare exploded before his eyes, transforming from a ray of white light into a thousand blazing sparks!

Accompanying the dazzling, magnificent sword glare was a violent upsurge of murderous intent that swept toward him. Internal energy swelled forth like the tide, brimming with potent true qi. In an instant, thundering storms swallowed the heavens and squalling blizzards rolled across the earth.

Sang Jingxing was stunned. He hastily withdrew his outstretched hand and swiftly retreated, evading the sudden attack.

A man who could kill Huo Xijing wasn’t some weakling to be trampled by just anyone. While Sang Jingxing had been spewing taunts and ridicule, he’d reserved a small bit of caution within his heart, as it was commonplace for demonic practitioners to fight and kill one another. The higher a person climbed, the more blades and treachery they’d have to fend off from all directions. Sang Jingxing wouldn’t have lived this long if he’d been a man of blind ignorance.

But now he realized that he’d still underestimated Shen Qiao.

He launched a palm strike while retreating, but the sword glare enveloped even the sky and moon. It was completely watertight—even his palm blasts found no opening. Each and every one dissolved into nothingness.

Was this really the same Shen Qiao who’d lost nearly all his martial arts?!

Sang Jingxing was alarmed and in disbelief. He almost suspected that Shen Qiao and Yan Wushi were plotting against him together.

But he didn’t have time to speculate further. The sword qi was already a hair’s breadth from his eyes, as brutal as rumbling thunder and as mighty as the blazing sun.

The winds of heaven gallop, surging and swift; the mountains and seas abide, endless and grand. All things emerge and return, from many to one, from one to many.

There lay the boundless sword intent, unbroken and interlinked, following Sang Jingxing like his own shadow. It was impossible to evade, impossible to avoid. It seemed his only option was to close his eyes and wait for death.

But Sang Jingxing wasn’t so easily dealt with. He laughed coldly, and though he only took a few steps, he shifted between myriad poses. He glided easily through the sword glare, then struck right at it. His internal energy shrieked forth as blue qi, its force as mighty as a mountain. Right away, Shanhe Tongbei’s sword glare began to dim.

Before his first strike finished, his second one arrived. Hehuan Sect’s martial arts shared its roots with Huanyue Sect but were even more uncanny and unpredictable. He’d reached the pinnacle of perfection with his Carving Dragon Palm technique—each turn and flip of his hand was unimaginably exquisite. After nine strikes, a real dragon seemed to descend, formed from true qi as it coiled faintly through the air. It shrieked forward, swallowing the sword glare in an instant.

The brilliant, celestial glow vanished all at once. It was still the same forest, still the same two people. Shen Qiao coughed up a mouthful of blood and stumbled backward, slamming into a tree trunk. He could barely grip his sword.

And finally, something surfaced on his blank, emotionless face—a look of surprised rage.

He’d used all that he’d learned and studied to deal with Sang Jingxing, but his internal cultivation couldn’t support such an attack—the effort had taxed him greatly. But as he transmitted every last trickle of his body’s true qi, not only did the Dantian[19] in his abdomen fail to refine new

true qi to replace it, it was like a vortex had appeared and was greedily sucking away all of his true qi.

At the same time, Shen Qiao could feel the true qi in his body rampaging like a crazed horse that had broken free of its reins. It tore relentlessly through his organs, driving his spirit to complete madness. His mind plunged into panic as his emotions roared. It was as if a mass of black shadows held him prisoner, leaving him no escape and driving him to the brink of qi deviation.

Yan. Wu. Shi.

Yan Wu Shi!

Yan Wushi had implanted a demonic core inside him while he was unconscious!

Perhaps it'd happened back in the beginning, when he was insensate after falling from Banbu Peak. Or perhaps it'd happened during one of the many times he'd passed out, defenseless after an injury. A wisp of demonic qi had silently slipped inside, then lain dormant inside him, like a seed. It refused to emerge, regardless of what happened, so Shen Qiao never realized it was there. Not until now, when Sang Jinxing's demonic arts had fully aroused it. The seed burst from the ground, transforming at last into a towering tree.

But he'd fought Yan Wushi countless times in the past. Why had he never discovered the demonic core's existence?

Or had Yan Wushi foreseen long ago that this day would come? So that, when he'd fought Shen Qiao, he never used his full strength.

Shen Qiao couldn't even begin to describe his state of mind right now.

It was as if his entire body was cloaked in flames—flames with sharp teeth that gnawed at his meridians and his organs bit by bit. The agony was tremendous, yet his mind was incomparably clear!

Shen Qiao didn't know if this was his final rally before death or if he was hallucinating from the unbearable pain. But somehow, his eyes, which had been burning just a moment before, showed him Sang Jingxing's palm as it struck out at him.

It came on with incredible speed, yet it was clear beyond compare.

And despite this critical juncture of life and death, Shen Qiao suddenly remembered what Yan Wushi had once said to him.

Once you've been truly deserted by everyone, completely and utterly alone, can you still bear no grudges and insist on repaying others with kindness?

Shen Qiao closed his eyes. Even the breaths he exhaled seemed to carry the thick scent of blood.

The searing wind from the palm swept toward him.

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Chapter 46:
Between Life and Death

THE GAP BETWEEN their martial abilities was stark. Especially after Shen Qiao discovered the demonic core implanted in him—his emotions rampaged, his foundations were on the verge of collapse. The advantage he'd gained from striking first vanished completely. His sword glare was quashed, its overwhelming brilliance faded into a dim glow, just like the near-extinguished flame of Shen Qiao's own life, flickering in the wind.

Sang Jingxing had been astonished by how much he'd underestimated Shen Qiao at first, but his surprise didn't last long. When he saw Shen Qiao unable to continue, he even laughed. "The rumors said you lost most of your martial arts, and it seems they were right. Strange, why didn't Yan Wushi drain your martial power dry? Instead, he left you to me."

The power of his attacks was undiminished by his pause to speak. Where his Carving Dragon Palms landed, his true qi transformed into the vague shape of a dragon. But this wasn't the usual merciful, benevolent dragon—it was full of savagery, and it roared toward Shen Qiao, its bloody maw gaping wide!

Sang Jingxing didn't want to kill Shen Qiao just yet, so he only struck with most of his strength, not all—even if he thoroughly shattered Shen Qiao's meridians and crippled all his limbs, he could still play with him for a while.

The crazed dragon engulfed the sky, blotting out even the moon. The leaves vanished as the sky plunged into darkness, and the scene turned harsh and forlorn.

And yet, the roaring dragon ground to a halt in midair.

Because a sudden, enormous burst of qi erupted from Shen Qiao. In the pitch-black night, a mass of light exploded out, impossibly dazzling, impossibly blinding.

The "light" swelled with tremendous speed, growing larger and larger. It swallowed the bloodthirsty, murderous dragon in an instant,

pulverizing it until nothing was left.

Sang Jingxing didn’t even have time to express his surprise—his face paled and he pushed off the air itself, sharply reversing direction to retreat.

But it was already too late. Shen Qiao shot off the ground, and, from his hand, Shanhe Tongbei pierced toward Sang Jingxing with the momentum of raging thunder.

It wasn’t a flashy move, nor profound—it was only a straightforward thrust. As Shen Qiao moved, his body seemed as light as a feather, yet stalwart as a mountain. With almost impossible speed, he flashed in front of Sang Jingxing in an instant.

Sang Jingxing felt a chill flutter down his back, as if a basin of ice water had been poured over his heart.

However, he wasn’t his disciple Huo Xijing, so Huo Xijing’s death wouldn’t play out a second time.

He sent a palm strike at Shen Qiao while his other hand grabbed at the wrist of Shen Qiao’s sword hand.

But it was to no avail. Sang Jingxing felt an agony beyond compare, like his hand being minced. The true qi protecting his body was completely ineffectual in that moment—he could even feel the flesh of his palm being shredded off, slice by slice.

His face twisted, finally revealing a hint of terror and disbelief. He stared at Shen Qiao with the expression of one looking at a madman.

“You destroyed your own foundations?!”

Nothing was more important to a martial artist than their foundations.

They were cultivated bit by bit, year by year, from childhood to adulthood. There were no shortcuts to the process.

Shen Qiao’s foundation was his Daoist core. Destroying his Daoist core now said that he meant to die with Sang Jingxing.

Sang Jingxing was stronger, but if they kept going, there was no way he could win unless he wanted to stake his all on the fight and pay the same price—to destroy the entirety of his martial arts.

Of course, Sang Jingxing was not willing to do that, so he chose to turn and withdraw.

But the true qi erupting from Shen Qiao had already scoured away both of his palms—in just a moment, they'd become a mess of mangled, bloody flesh. The agony was utterly unbearable.

He really was a madman!

An utterly *hopeless* madman!

He gritted his teeth but wavered. His movements slowed just a whit, and in that moment of hesitation the massive shock wave from Shen Qiao's self-detonation smashed straight through his true qi. The sword glare gouged deep into his chest, leaving behind a gash that cut him to the bone.

"Ahhh!" Sang Jingxing screamed involuntarily. No longer hesitating, he turned and fled immediately.

However, the fierce and brilliant sword intent was already descending behind him, fully formed as it engulfed both heaven and earth.

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"Shizun! Shizun! When A-Yu and A-Ying were practicing the Azure Waves sword technique just now, their pose for the last move was different from yours. Why didn't your esteemed self correct them?"

"Because 'point your sword up' is only an approximate description. There's no rule that says how far up. Is it by one inch or two inches? A-Qiao, this is true for practicing martial arts, and it's true when it comes to the kind of person you become. Don't fixate on the rules—that will only limit your depth and breadth of mind."

Swaddled in many layers, the child wobbled as he walked, but he still persisted in grabbing the robe of the tall figure before him. His expression said he didn't really understand, but it still brimmed with admiration and the desire to cling.

The figure saw how he refused to let go and smiled, then crouched down and picked him up. They walked together.

“There are many people in this world. Some of them good, some of them bad. But even more can’t be categorized as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Their thoughts may be different from yours, and the paths they choose may also be different. Just like Yu Ai and Yuan Ying—the same sword technique, but differences still arise when each uses it. You mustn’t reject others just because they’re different from you. As a person, you have to be like an ocean that embraces the hundred rivers: tolerant and broad-minded. The same holds true as a martial artist. The narrow-minded are limited in what they can achieve. Even if they reach the summit, they won’t be able to stand there for long.”

“Then what about A-Qiao?” said the child. “Is A-Qiao good or bad?” His round eyes were as black as pitch, yet crystal clear. Within them was reflected the image of his dearest person.

A hand immediately stroked his head. It was warm and dry, like balmy sunlight cradling his body.

“My A-Qiao is the cutest.”

The child became a little shy at this gratifying answer, but he couldn’t hold back a bright smile.

But that warmth suddenly vanished, and the surrounding scenery shattered, including the person holding him.

He was still on Xuandu Mountain.

On a long-gone day at Hannan, I planted a willow so tender and fair. Today at the riverside I found it withered, the picture of woeful despair.[20]

If even the trees diminished, could people be any different?

If even the scenery could change with time, could people escape?

He was already the same height as the dearest companion who’d chased after him wanting to be called “Shixiong.” He’d stood before Shen Qiao, grieving and frustrated as he said, “Shixiong, nobody wants to wallow in solitude. Xuandu Mountain is clearly the world’s number one Daoist sect, and it has the strength to support an enlightened ruler who can help Daoism influence the world. So why must we act like hermits and hide ourselves away in the mountains? Everyone on Xuandu Mountain agrees except you. You’re the one who’s being too naive!”

Was that so? Was it really because he was so naive?

He'd only wanted to protect the place Shizun and the previous sect leaders left to them. To protect his martial siblings, keep them safe from the flames of war, and far away from the scheming and intrigue of the jianghu.

Was he wrong?

"Yes, you're wrong," someone said to him. "You're wrong because you never understood the human heart. You thought that everyone in the world was like you—lacking desires, lacking aspirations. Did you think they'd be content with the same carefree lifestyle? Human beings are evil by nature. No matter how deep their love runs, the moment you get in their way, they'll eliminate you without hesitation. Have you really yet to realize that?

"People as naive as you are doomed to live short lives. Without Xuandu Mountain, without Qi Fengge's radiance, you're nothing, and you're capable of nothing.

"My venerable self doesn't need friends. Only one kind of person is qualified to stand as my equal: an opponent."

"You destroyed your own meridians?! You're destroying all your avenues of retreat?! You're completely mad!"

All those past affairs, all those voices, crumbled in the aftermath of those words.

As if everything had returned to the beginning.

Excruciating agony burst through his entire body—as if someone were continuously grinding a dull knife against his bones, as if hundreds of thousands of ants were burrowing through his flesh. He'd always considered his pain tolerance enormous, but at this moment he yearned to release a tortured moan and to drench his face in tears. He even wished he could stab a sharp sword through his own heart, just to cease this endless torment.

But what he perceived as his screams and howls were merely a mosquito's buzz to the ears of others.

"Shen-langjun? Are you awake?"

The voice was very soft and faint, as if it came from a great distance away.

In truth, the speaker was on his belly next to Shen Qiao, but Shen Qiao's current condition made it difficult for him to tell.

He tried with all his might to answer the voice, but in the end, he could only twitch a finger.

The other person saw this and whispered to him, "Shen-langjun, you can hear me, right? Then I'll speak. You need only listen. If you can hear me, just move your finger."

Shen Qiao did so quickly.

He could tell that it was the voice of the young boy priest from Bailong Monastery—the abbot's junior disciple, Shiwu.

Sure enough, he said, "I'm Shiwu. I found you two days ago when I was picking herbs on the mountain. You were lying inside a cave, barely breathing, and your whole body was cold as ice. It really scared me. I couldn't move you by myself, so I had to go back and tell Shifu so he could carry you back."

Now Shen Qiao remembered as well. He'd destroyed his martial arts, prepared to take Sang Jingxing down with him. Although he didn't succeed, he'd gravely injured Sang Jingxing, giving himself the chance to escape. He'd hidden in the nearby Bailong Mountain, thinking his death was certain and imminent. But, unexpectedly, Shiwu had found him.

He wanted to ask if Sang Jingxing had shown up, if Shen Qiao had embroiled them in more trouble. But even after struggling and struggling, he couldn't make a single sound. His eyelids were quivering violently—it was obvious how anxious he was.

Shiwu noticed and quickly found him a cup of water. He held it to Shen Qiao's mouth, letting him drink bit by bit.

The cool water trickled down his throat, moistening it. After a long moment, Shen Qiao finally felt much better. He opened his eyes, and, just as he'd expected, he saw nothing but darkness.

He thought it was his eyes, but Shiwu said, "We're in Bailong Monastery's cellar, and no lamps are lit. That's why it's pitch-black."

Shen Qiao opened his mouth and there was a rasping sound so hoarse he could scarcely recognize himself. “Did…anyone come…looking for…you…?”

His body was so weak that he could only force each word out one by one. The task was arduous and grueling.

“Yes,” said Shiwu. “The Duke of Pengcheng’s men came twice, probably as revenge for the donkey-meat sandwich incident. Luckily, Shifu foresaw it and moved us down here ahead of time. The monastery is so run-down, there wasn’t much for them to smash. They came in and looked around but couldn’t find anyone, so they left. They probably thought we ran away!”

When he reached the end, a laugh sputtered out of him.

“I’m…sorry…” said Shen Qiao.

“No, Shen-langjun,” said Shiwu. “You mustn’t say that!”

He seemed to sense Shen Qiao’s misgivings, for he quickly continued, “Do you remember? That day in the Xiang Province capital, your esteemed self gave your share of flatbread to a child. He thanked you and kowtowed, and said he wanted to set up a longevity tablet for you.”

Once another wave of searing bodily agony slowly abated, Shen Qiao pushed himself to remember. A vague impression rose in his mind.

“You’re that…”

Shiwu was a little frail, but he looked clean and tidy, fair and tender. Practically a different person from that jaundiced, emaciated child in his memory who’d looked barely human.

“Yes, that was me. After that, Father wanted to trade me for another kid to eat, but Mother refused. She did everything she could to stop him—she said she’d sell herself instead, if he’d only leave me and my younger siblings alone. Father agreed, but just a few days after he traded Mother away for food, my brother and sister fell sick, one after the other, and died.” Shiwu’s voice choked up a little. “Father thought I was dragging him down and wanted to cook me, but luckily, that’s when we met Shifu. He paid for me with a bag of flatbread and took me away, so I went with Shifu to live in

Bailong Monastery. My original name didn’t sound good, so Shifu gave me a new one: Shiwu.”

Shiwu wiped away his tears and gripped Shen Qiao’s hand as if trying to comfort him, but he didn’t dare clutch too hard in fear of hurting Shen Qiao. “I’ve always remembered your kindness. If not for that piece of flatbread, I might not have lasted long enough to meet Shifu. So please don’t say that you’re sorry. Even if your esteemed self hadn’t saved me, how could I leave you when I saw you lying there on the verge of death?”

Shen Qiao’s hand trembled, the corners of his eyes glimmering with tears. Perhaps it was from Shiwu’s words or because he’d recalled some old memories.

Shiwu thought it was because of the pain and hurriedly said, “Are you in a lot of pain? I’ll go get Shifu to bring you some medicine!”

The abbot arrived just in time to hear Shiwu and grumbled, “What medicine?! I just brought some a moment ago! Do you think medicine is free?!”

So he said, but he still came over, picked up Shen Qiao’s hand, and began taking his pulse.

“Your meridians are all destroyed—no internal energy whatsoever. What exactly did you do to turn yourself into this?! You can forget about practicing martial arts ever again!” The abbot clicked his tongue.

“Shifu!” Shiwu panicked, afraid that it would be too much for Shen Qiao to hear.

The abbot rolled his eyes at the boy. “Why are you so soft? He hasn’t even said anything yet, and you’re already panicking for him! I’m not the one who destroyed his martial arts!”

Sure enough, Shen Qiao didn’t speak for a long while.

Quietly, Shiwu said, “Shen-langjun, don’t be sad. Shifu is a great doctor…”

“Hey!” said the abbot. “Say, you’re not some virgin maiden who’s about to get married, so why are you always siding against your own? When have I ever been a great doctor? I just have some basic understanding! Basic! Get it?!”

Shiwu grabbed on to the hem of his robe. “Shifu has a harsh tongue but a gentle heart!” he said sweetly. “He’s actually a very kind person! Amazing too!”

“You little brat!” said the abbot derisively. He turned to Shen Qiao. “Your injury’s too serious. I’m no medical expert, and we don’t have all the herbs you need here. I can only do my best. But there’s nothing I can do about your martial arts. Your foundations are completely gone—this isn’t something that can be reversed through human efforts…”

Shen Qiao suddenly asked, “May I…ask if…there’s still…poison… in my body…?”

“Poison? What poison?” The abbot was bewildered. “I didn’t find any poison when I took your pulse!”

To double-check, he once again placed three fingers over Shen Qiao’s wrist and observed. After a moment, he withdrew his hand. “Your injuries might be grave, but I didn’t find any sign of poisoning.”

Ever since Shen Qiao had been poisoned with Joyful Reunion, it lingered on inside him. Even Yan Wushi had been unable to do anything about it. The poison had pervaded his bones and blood, flickering between active and dormant. It’d always impeded the recovery of his martial arts and made his attempts at cultivating internal energy ineffectual. His eyes had also suffered—they’d never fully healed.

But now the abbot said there was no poison within him.

He’d destroyed his martial arts, fully prepared to take Sang Jingxing down with him, yet that very descent into certain death ended up saving his life—it even drove the poison out of him completely.

Did this count as a blessing in disguise?

Shen Qiao’s lips tugged faintly upward in a wry smile.

The abbot walked in carrying a candlestick, which he placed next to Shen Qiao. He saw the slight curve of Shen Qiao’s mouth and said, bewildered, “You can still smile? In your awful state?”

The abbot twisted around and asked Shiwu, “Say, do you think all the awfulness broke him and turned him into a fool?”

“Shifu!” Shiwu sorely wished he could cover his master’s mouth.

“All right, all right!” said the abbot. “I won’t say anything more! That congee should be finished boiling about now—I’ll go take a look. It’s so strange not having that little brat Chuyi here to order around!”

As the abbot walked away again, he clicked his tongue. “Finding that old piece of ginseng took so much trouble, I couldn’t even bear to eat it! And now an outsider is getting the whole thing!”

“Please don’t take it to heart,” Shiwu said apologetically once the abbot was gone. “Shifu has always been like this—sharp-tongued but tenderhearted. He’s not good with words, but everything these last two days has been thanks to him! I really wouldn’t know what to do otherwise!”

“I know…” said Shen Qiao. “I’m…not crazy either… Is this… cellar…connected to…the outside? I think…I see…light.”

One by one, he forced out his words arduously.

“Yes,” said Shiwu. “Shifu bored two holes in the wall so some light can shine in. Your esteemed self can see now?”

“Gradually…I can…see a little…but it’s…not very clear.”

“Please don’t worry,” said Shiwu. “Shifu said that the cellar is very well hidden—it’ll be hard to find. The Duke of Pengcheng County’s men came twice and didn’t find us either time, so they just left. Shifu said that, in a little while, they’ll think we moved and they won’t come anymore.”

“Thank you…”

Shiwu laughed. “No need to thank me! Your esteemed self should rest well. Don’t worry, and focus on getting better. I’ll go boil some water for you.”

The place was dark and sunless, but it was quiet and excellent for recuperation. Shiwu said that Bailong Monastery had been built during the Han Dynasty’s final years, which made it over three hundred years old. Though it’d withstood the flames of war time and again, the bustle and incense it’d once seen were no more. All that was left was a scarred monastery, forsaken by all. By the time Shiwu’s shifu had moved in, it was already completely empty. The cellar was connected to a tunnel—likely dug when the monastery was built. When Shiwu’s shifu discovered it, it became a fantastic place to seek refuge.

Shen Qiao spent another two days in a dazed sleep. Sometimes his mind was clear, sometimes it was a jumbled mess. In the small hours, when he woke from his dreams, he'd find himself back in the past—so much so that he felt like he was still on Xuandu Mountain. As if, just by opening the doors, he'd be able to see Shizun standing outside, watching the disciples practice.

But of course, it wasn't real. The past could never return, and the people who were gone, were gone.

It seemed those wonderful, peaceful years were left behind on Xuandu mountain, forever gone.

What followed them were all he'd experienced since: betrayal, setbacks, and dilemmas. The many countries warring with each other, seeking wealth and fame. The sects all plotting against each other, each clinging to their own views. The common folk groaning in their hell, struggling, unable to escape.

Suffering so ghastly, so unbearable, it was like he'd gone through it all himself.

"There was only one reason you were able to faithfully follow your Daoist core and refuse to give up on your so-called principles. It's because you've never been in a situation so hopeless that you could no longer endure. Am I right?"

Yan Wushi had asked him that once.

Shen Qiao once again recalled his words. He remembered their interactions, bit by bit.

He'd thought that they were friends, once. But that notion hadn't withstood a single blow of the other man's mockery and scheming.

But even if he could start over…

If he could start over…

"Shen-langjun, are you feeling better today? This is rice congee with mountain ginseng, freshly cooked! Shifu said that it'll be a great help to your recovery… Oh no, Shen-langjun, why are you crying? Does it hurt too much?!"

Beneath the feeble light, sparkling beads slowly, soundlessly, slid from the corners of Shen Qiao's eyes and into his hair.

Hastily, Shiwu put down the congee and flung himself over. "I'll go call Shifu!"

"No need." With great effort, Shen Qiao reached out and grabbed the boy's robe.

Shiwu yelped in surprise. "You can move now?!" he said, with undisguised joy. "Shifu said that your meridians were totally destroyed so you probably wouldn't recover, not for the rest of your life! Looks like Shifu was only trying to scare me!"

Shen Qiao smiled at him.

While he was awake, his every bone screamed in agony—enough agony that he wished for death, right there. But he'd borne it, silently reciting lines of the *Zhuyang Strategy* that he'd studied. With this, something rather surprising had happened.

Back when he'd been studying the *Zhuyang Strategy*, he already had Xuandu Mountain's martial arts as his foundation, so it wasn't too difficult to pick up. But no matter what he did, his progress remained slow and steady, and even Qi Fengge couldn't uncover the reason. Tao Hongjing had already passed by then, so Qi Fengge couldn't ask him for an explanation. All he could do was let his disciple fumble along on his own and offer the occasional suggestion.

But now, with all his meridians damaged and his true qi lost, the *Zhuyang Strategy* brought about something completely unexpected: his shattered Dantian began recovering at an unbelievable speed, and his ruined meridians began to remold themselves, nourished by the *Zhuyang Strategy*'s true qi.

It looked possible that, before long, his injuries would be completely healed.

The *Zhuyang Strategy* was truly incredible—it had combined the strengths of all three schools of thought. Even though Shen Qiao had only studied two of the volumes, he still could see how profound and extensive its wisdom was.

The structured righteousness of Confucianism, the gentle clemency of Daoism, the solemn insight of Buddhism—each of them became as tiny streams trickling through his body.

Shen Qiao didn't know if he'd stumbled upon a lifeline in the face of certain death, but his body grew better day by day, and the speed of recovery astonished even the abbot, who'd deemed him a lost cause.

Considerately, Shiwu didn't ask him why he'd cried, but Shen Qiao took the initiative to reach for him. "Thank you, Shiwu."

Shiwu was confused and a little embarrassed. "Your esteemed self has already thanked me many times!"

Shen Qiao treated others with kindness, but he'd never felt entitled to their kind treatment in return. After all, he'd act the same, regardless of whether they repaid him.

Everything he did was because he wanted to do it. It had nothing to do with whether other people understood him, approved of him, or mocked him.

Looking at things from this point of view, he and Yan Wushi were the same.

But in the end, Shen Qiao was only human. He didn't have a heart as pure as snow, nor a spirit as sturdy as iron. He, too, grew tired and disheartened, and felt pain.

"This thanks is different," he said.

"You've recovered so much already." Shiwu smiled shyly. "Shifu said you should start eating meat. He bought a chicken today to make some soup."

Shen Qiao was apologetic. "You've spent so much on me. Once I'm healed, I'll go and earn some money…"

Shiwu laughed. "You don't have to worry about that. Actually, Shifu has secretly saved up quite a stash—he just refuses to use it. So he keeps pretending to be hard up…"

"Shiwu, are you itching for a beating?! How can you bad-mouth your Shifu in front of other people! You treacherous little bastard! Ungrateful disciple!" The abbot had come in just in time to hear Shiwu talking.

Shiwu stuck out his tongue. “This disciple’s sorry! Please don’t be angry!”

“How did I think you were more well behaved than Chuyi?!” roared the abbot. “Each of you is more disappointing than the next! Good-for-nothing disciples!”

Shiwu obediently listened to his master’s admonishments and bowed respectfully, his manner childishly sweet.

Once the abbot’s temper finally calmed a little, he began complaining about his senior disciple. “There’s a fair on the north side of the city today. Chuyi ran off early in the morning and still hasn’t returned! Look at how wild he is! If he could sprout wings, he’d probably soar right to the heavens!”

“Perhaps Shixiong found something delicious and is bringing some back for us?”

“Bringing back, my ass!” said the abbot. “He only has a couple coppers! He won’t even have enough to buy something for himself!”

Suddenly, a bell rang in the cellar.

The tiny bell’s chime was very faint. But the abbot, standing right next to it, heard it immediately.

It was a simple mechanism—the bell was attached to a string that threaded outside, its other end tied somewhere around the front gates. Whenever someone entered, the movement would jostle the string, notifying the cellar’s inhabitants right away.

“Shixiong must have returned!” said Shiwu cheerily.

The boy was about to head out, but the abbot grabbed him. “Wait!” he said. “Something’s wrong!”

The moment these words left his mouth, Chuyi’s bubbly, vivacious voice came to them from outside. “Shifu, Shiwu, I’m back… Eh? Who are you?”

The abbot paled. This was bad.

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Chapter 47:
Interrogation

AFTER SHEN QIAO had humiliated him, Chen Gong sent men to the monastery twice.

The first time, they were courteous, claiming they wanted to invite Shen Qiao to the Duke of Pengcheng's residence as a guest. They refused to believe that Shen Qiao wasn't there, so the abbot let them search the entire monastery before they left, angry.

The second time, they weren't so courteous. They swaggered in with great arrogance. Chen Gong understood Shen Qiao fairly well and knew he disliked dragging other people into his problems, so he'd commanded his men to apprehend the abbot and his two disciples and take them away. Shen Qiao was sure to show up at Chen Gong's door himself after that.

But the abbot anticipated this. He took his two disciples and hid inside the cellar, leaving Chen Gong's men empty-handed. They figured the priests must have absconded the previous night. At a loss, they could only report back.

Chuyi had never been as quiet as Shiwu. After a few days in the cellar, he was already anxious to leave. The place was dark, the air musty—much less comfortable than staying above ground. The city happened to be holding a fair just then, so Chuyi pleaded and wheedled for hours before the abbot finally relented and let him head out to visit the fair. The abbot even warned him not to return too early.

But there was no escaping fate. Although Chuyi had kept his arrival back at the monastery as quiet as possible, the newcomer was a skilled martial artist—it was impossible to escape their notice.

When they spoke, Shen Qiao's expression fell.

"Do you live here, young priest?" the newcomer said.

"Who are you?" asked Chuyi.

Two holes had been bored into the cellar so that the inhabitants could breathe. The people who'd first built the place gave it a very special design—though the people within could hear noises from without, it was very difficult for those outside to find the cellar.

Seeing Shen Qiao's expression, the abbot mouthed, *Who is he?*

Shen Qiao covered his mouth, forcing down his urge to cough. Then he dipped his finger in some water and quickly wrote a few words atop the table.

Xiao Se

Member of Hehuan Sect

Yuan Xiuxiu's disciple

I was injured during a fight with Sang Jingxing.

It was true that Yuan Xiuxiu and Sang Jingxing were at odds with each other, but they were also both from Hehuan Sect. Regardless, Xiao Se's sudden arrival wasn't likely to mean anything good.

Shiwu was still a little confused, but the abbot understood. His frown deepened, and his complexion took on a pale tinge of green.

When Shen Qiao had first begun lodging here, he took the three for ordinary Daoist priests. Only when the abbot took his pulse did he realize the man was probably from the jianghu too.

But the identity of the abbot didn't matter anymore. What did matter was that Xiao Se had shown up at the monastery. It wasn't possible he was there with good intentions—most likely, he'd come for Shen Qiao.

"My name is Xiao Se," they heard him say. His voice was gentle, more like a guest than someone who'd come looking for trouble. "Young priest, have you ever met a man named Shen Qiao?"

"I—I haven't!"

Xiao Se laughed. "Young priest, you can't even lie. Tell me, where is he?"

"I don't know!" Chuyi said loudly. "Who are you?! Hurry up and leave, or my shifu'll beat you to death when he gets back!"

Xiao Se wasn’t at all put off. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to bring you back to Elder Sang,” he said softly. “He’s in a terrible mood nowadays—he’s already killed three of his beauties. And I was just worrying that his esteemed self wouldn’t have anyone left to take his anger out on! Don’t do something so foolish for little old Shen Qiao!”

In the cellar, Shen Qiao struggled to get out of bed while the abbot held him down firmly. His strength was so great, Shen Qiao couldn’t shove him off.

“Listen to me!” He dropped his voice low, his mouth pressed to Shen Qiao’s ear as he spoke. “Hehuan Sect revel in slaughter. They won’t let Chuyi go just because you show yourself. You’d only end up in trouble together. You stay here and look after Shiwu. I’ll go!”

Shen Qiao knew the abbot was right, but he couldn’t imagine hiding in safety while someone else bore the brunt of what should have been his responsibility.

He shook his head. Just when he was about to say that he’d save Chuyi at all costs, the abbot moved with lightning speed, locking his acupoints. Then he swiftly fished an object from his lapels and shoved it into Shen Qiao’s hand. “If anything happens, take Shiwu to Bixia Sect on Mount Tai. Tell them that their good-for-nothing disciple Zhu Lengquan accepted his own disciple while out in the world. Let Shiwu return to his sect and forefathers.”

When the abbot finished, he also locked Shiwu’s acupoints. “I didn’t press too hard,” he said to them both. “They’ll undo themselves in about a quarter of an hour. I’ve entrusted Shiwu to you, Shen-gongzi. Remember: this is your duty now.”

Then he stood and left the cellar, never looking back.

The way out of the cellar led in many different directions. To prevent Xiao Se from discovering the entrance, the abbot purposefully took the path to a different room, then walked outside from there.

“It’s the middle of the night! Who’s going around disturbing people’s sleep?” He stretched as he walked out, drowsiness written all over his face. “Who are you? Why are you clutching my disciple?”

“Shifu!” Xiao Se’s hand was clamped over Chuyi’s shoulder. When the boy saw the abbot, tears just about streamed down his face.

“Are you the master of this monastery?” asked Xiao Se.

“I am. And who are you, exactly?” The abbot frowned. “If my disciple has offended you, I’ll apologize, as his master. Please let him go.”

Xiao Se didn’t release Chuyi. His gaze swept over the sword in the abbot’s hand, and he smiled. “Where is Shen Qiao?”

“Who’s that? I’ve never heard of such a person.”

Xiao Se narrowed his eyes. “We’re both intelligent men here. Playing the fool won’t do you any good. Say, if I crush your disciple’s shoulder, will he cave to the pain and call out to the one you’re hiding?”

He tightened his grip, causing Chuyi to howl and scream. The boy began “paying his respects” to eighteen generations of Xiao Se’s ancestors using all sorts of popular vulgarities.

“Stop!” No longer hesitating, the abbot drew his sword. The edge trembled slightly as he lunged at the other man.

Xiao Se kept hold of Chuyi, but his movements weren’t slowed by the boy in his clutches. His other palm struck out as he muttered, “This is your shifu’s matter, but you dumped the responsibility onto me. If you keep out of it now, you’ll just have to demand Shen Qiao’s whereabouts yourself later. After all, this young priest is quite decent-looking—bringing him back will be sufficient for my report to Shifu.”

From above and to the side, a delicate laugh rang out. “Xiao-shixiong, your shifu might be the sect leader, but her influence in the sect doesn’t even compare to my shifu’s! I say you should just switch sides and join mine instead!”

Xiao Se snorted but didn’t respond.

The abbot’s expression, however, fell drastically.

Two more people appeared in front of him, accompanied by laughter.

One of them wore white, and her appearance was tender and sweet. This was Bai Rong, whom Shen Qiao had met many times.

As for the other person, though his head was shaved, he was no monk, for his clothes were even more extravagant than the average rich young master. It was a terribly incongruous combination.

But the abbot didn't dare look down on him on account of his strange clothing because he knew who this person was.

It was another problematic member of Hehuan Sect, Yan Shou.

He had a moniker: "the Buddha with the Blood-Soaked Hand." Though he possessed the dignified appearance of a buddha, his heart was as savage as a demon's. His hands were thoroughly bloodstained—no one knew how many lives they were laden with.

Yan Shou wasn't as deranged as Huo Xijing, who'd loved to skin people's faces day in and day out, but he'd taken just as many lives.

It was obvious now: Shen Qiao had injured Sang Jingxing gravely, so he hated Shen Qiao to the bone. Naturally, he sent his disciples to look for him.

If it had been only Xiao Se, the abbot thought, he still might have been able to force a retreat if he gave it his all. But with two more, it was now one against three. He couldn't hold on to that hope any longer.

"Give us Shen Qiao," said Yan Shou.

Though he barely moved, Chuyi went from Xiao Se's hands to Yan Shou's in the blink of an eye. Chuyi knew little of martial arts—some mild torture was enough to flood his face with tears as he cried, "Shifu, save me!" But no matter how he wailed, he didn't say where Shen Qiao and Shiwu were.

The abbot felt like his heart was being torn open, and he put aside any concerns about his lack of strength. With a twirl of his sword, he thrust forward.

But Yan Shou didn't meet him—Bai Rong did.

Blessed with incredible talent in martial arts, her skills grew in leaps and bounds every day. She was at a higher level now than when Shen Qiao had last seen her: her "Blue Lotus Palms" transformed into hundreds of thousands of lotus flowers, all blossoming around the abbot. As he pierced

each of them one by one, they rebloomed, growing and multiplying endlessly, perhaps infinitely.

Sweat trickled down the abbot's forehead. He could still manage Bai Rong on her own, but Yan Shou and Xiao Se were on the sidelines, so the pressure on him was immense. He knew very well that even if he could beat back Bai Rong, the other two might attack at any time.

And if he withdrew now, he might be able to escape intact, but Chuyi was in their hands. It was impossible for the abbot to abandon him.

Yan Shou saw this weakness, and his grip on the boy tightened. "Where is Shen Qiao?"

Chuyi let out another wail of pain.

The abbot's heart trembled, and his hand quivered in tandem. Spotting an opening, Bai Rong slammed one of her palms into his chest. He hacked up blood, stumbling back three steps.

"I don't know any Shen Qiao! How unreasonable can you lot be to attack us the moment you arrive! The two of us have been living peacefully in this broken-down place, and we've never offended anyone!"

Suddenly, Xiao Se laughed. "Elder Yan, look at his moves. Don't they look those from like Mount Tai's Bixia Sect?"

"Mm," said Yan Shou. "There is indeed some resemblance."

"Why would someone from Mount Tai's Bixia Sect run away here and conceal his identity? Perhaps a disciple who'd been expelled?"

The abbot made his decision. Gritting his teeth, he let out a cold laugh. "That's right! I'm Zhu Lengquan from Bixia Sect! The current Sect Leader Zhao is my shizhi.[21] If you have any relationship with Bixia Sect, please let me and my disciple go. I'll be sure to ask the sect leader to express our gratitude someday!"

Xiao Se burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, but we must disappoint you. We don't have any dealings with Bixia Sect. Furthermore, you'll bear a grudge for what happened today regardless. So why don't we settle this matter a little more absolutely, to avoid future issues?"

Right as he finished, Yan Shou slammed his palm down onto Chuyi's head.

Blood streamed from Chuyi's mouth and nose. He didn't even have time to make any noise—he simply fell to the ground without a sound.

"Chuyi!" The abbot's eyes bulged as grief ripped his heart in two. Unthinking, he lunged at Yan Shou with his sword.

Yan Shou didn't move—Xiao Se did.

Xiao Se spread his fan, and the blades tucked against its ribs sprang forth, gleaming with a shiver-inducing cold light. With a flick of his wrist, the folding fan itself flew at the abbot, circling him as if it had a mind of its own.

Seized with heartrending grief, the abbot's level of swordplay surged to new heights. Back during his days at Bixia Sect, everyone had thought that his aptitude was mediocre, and he'd done nothing to disabuse them of the notion. Instead, he spent his days loafing around. That was why he'd never mastered the last few moves of "Nineteen Moves of the Eastern Mountains," nor could he ever satisfy his master and elders.

But if Bixia Sect's previous generation could see his swordplay now, they'd be completely astonished.

This didn't look at all like someone with mediocre aptitude!

His sword glare spilled forth relentlessly, the blade undulating with a dazzling light. The sight of it would have had Chuyi yelling and cheering, going, "Shifu, I've never seen you look so majestic!"

But Chuyi was dead.

He'd never speak again, never bother anyone again, never loaf around and slack off ever again.

The abbot's eyes were bloodshot. Every swing of his blade brimmed with icy, murderous intent.

But even before his sword glare could pierce through the blades of Xiao Se's fan, it was knocked away.

One moment of carelessness later, the fan's blades sliced a long gash into the abbot's wrist, and he involuntarily loosened his grip.

The sword fell to the ground with a clang.

As Xiao Se withdrew his hand, he jabbed his elbow into the other man's chest. Then, when the abbot stumbled backward, Xiao Se grabbed his shoulder and yanked him forward again. In an instant, he'd sealed three major acupoints on his chest, and the abbot collapsed into a kneel, unable to move.

"You've already seen it—this isn't an empty bluff. Your disciple is already dead. Surely you don't want to follow him, hm?" Xiao Se was smiling brightly. "Just how charismatic is Shen Qiao that you're willing to risk your life to hide him?"

The abbot spat a mouthful of foamy blood at him. "Pah! What Shen Qiao, I already said I don't know him! Can you not understand human language?"

Xiao Se's smile faded. He pulled a handkerchief out of his sleeve and wiped the bloody foam from his face. Then, quick as lightning, he sliced off the abbot's left ear.

With his mute acupoint struck, the abbot couldn't even scream. He could only open his mouth and glare desperately at Xiao Se with rounded eyes.

Xiao Se squatted so that their gazes were level. "You've already had a taste of what Hehuan Sect is willing to do. Is Shen Qiao really worth throwing your life away like this? If you tell us his whereabouts, we'll let you live. It'll benefit all of us."

He waited a long while before unsealing the abbot's mute acupoint.

The abbot panted, his breath shuddering. Blood still dribbled from where his ear had been. He was in a wretched state, almost too awful to behold.

"I've already said…I don't know any Shen Qiao!"

"Xiao-shixiong, why waste your words on him?" Bai Rong cut in, smiling. "If he's trying to hide someone, he must be hiding him inside the monastery. Why don't we simply search the place?"

Then, to Yan Shou, she said, "No need to trouble Elder Yan for this. Xiao-shixiong and I will look."

Yan Shou neither spoke nor moved, giving her his tacit approval.

Bai Rong first went into the room the abbot had exited earlier. After a moment, she came out and said, “I didn’t see any mechanisms inside. I’m certain they didn’t hide him there.”

Xiao Se searched several other locations and found nothing either.

The monastery might have been dilapidated and falling apart, but the one point in its favor was its sheer size. It’d take quite some time to find someone who’d hidden themselves in one of its many crannies, even without considering that most old monasteries came with concealed escape tunnels.

Yan Shou grew tired of wasting time. “I’ll give you a quarter of an hour,” he said. “Tell us by then, or die.”

The abbot said nothing.

A quarter of an hour passed quickly. Bai Rong and Xiao Se returned one after the other, both saying they’d found nothing.

Xiao Se glanced askance at Bai Rong. “Bai-shimei, you searched quite a few places. Did you perhaps see something but deliberately said you didn’t? I remember you had quite the relationship with Shen Qiao.”

Bai Rong didn’t get angry—she even laughed. “What a strange thing for Xiao-shixiong to say! What relationship could I even have with Shen Qiao? If a fight constitutes a relationship, then Xiao-shixiong has quite the relationship with Shen Qiao too, no?”

“You…”

Yan Shou frowned. “Enough!”

He turned to the abbot. “Will you talk?”

The abbot gave a cold, sneering laugh. “You lunatic beasts. Forget that I don’t know Shen Qiao; even if I did know him, I wouldn’t tell you! Not after you killed my disciple and did this to me! You think that you can do whatever you want just because you’re stronger… Pah! Kill me if you can! One day, you’ll get your retribu—”

Yan Shou slammed a palm down onto his head before he could finish the word.

The abbot’s skull split, and fresh blood poured down. It streamed past his glaring eyes, which were still fixed on Yan Shou, before finally dribbling into his collar.

Even in death, his eyes remained wide open.

Mere inches lay between the bodies of master and disciple, but they could never come any closer.

Yan Shou didn’t give the corpse a second glance. He turned to Bai Rong. “Did you really not find anything?”

Bai Rong was completely unaffected by his piercing gaze. “I really didn’t find anything!” she said, still smiling cheerfully. “If you don’t believe me, Elder Yan and Xiao-shixiong can take another look? Perhaps I missed something!”

Down in the cellar, Shen Qiao’s and Shiwu’s acupoints had come undone. Shiwu trembled all over, tears streaming down his face.

Shen Qiao kept his hand clamped tightly over the boy’s mouth, preventing him from making a single sound. Though he was in tears as well, he still dragged the boy backward with all his might.

Shiwu had struggled like mad at first. He’d fought and fought, right up until the abbot was killed. Then, like he’d lost the last of his strength, he stopped resisting and let Shen Qiao drag him away.

The two of them stumbled and tripped as they walked down the dark tunnel. Shen Qiao’s grave injuries hadn’t healed, and his meridians weren’t fully repaired. Shiwu was barely lighter than Shen Qiao—dragging him made every bone in Shen Qiao’s body burst into pain. It was like iron chains were tearing at his flesh. Every arduous step took everything he had.

He didn’t know how long they walked. Perhaps it wasn’t very long at all, but Shen Qiao felt like half his lifetime had passed.

He pushed open the sealed stone door with a trembling hand—who knew when this door had last been used. He pulled Shiwu out, then groped for a hidden latch in the grass. Following the abbot’s instructions, he closed the door from outside.

With this, even if Yan Shou and the rest found the secret passage and chased them all the way here, they still wouldn’t be able to open the stone

door.

The secret passage connected to the other side of Bailong Mountain at its foot. This bought them enough time to find somewhere else to hide or to escape without too much hurry.

After securing the door, Shen Qiao let go of Shiwu. Then he leaned on a rock and burst into a coughing fit. His body felt like he'd gone through a torture chamber—he lacked even the strength to stand. It was only after he hacked up a couple mouthfuls of blood that the stuffiness in his chest eased up a little.

Meanwhile, Shiwu was still immersed deep inside his grief. He'd curled up, holding his knees against himself and burying his face in them, sobs shaking his entire body.

Shen Qiao sighed and stroked his head. "I'm sorry. If not for me, Zhu-xiong and Chuyi wouldn't have met with such a terrible fate. Let's get away from here first, though, all right? Even if it's for their sake. Once we're safe, I'll let you hit me and kill me however you wish. Anything you want."

Shiwu raised his face, still sobbing. "Shifu and Chuyi can never come back to life, right?"

Shen Qiao's eyes brimmed with tears, but he clenched his teeth, refusing to let them fall. His mind trembled, and another surge of salty-sweet blood rose in his throat.

"Yes, they can never come back to life. But their greatest wish was that you go on living. If you let those people capture you, how can you do right by them?"

Shiwu didn't make another sound but continued weeping silently. After a long while, he stood on shaky legs. "You're right! I must live on—I can't make Shifu worry… Where are we going?"

Shen Qiao drew a deep breath, then rasped, "To the east. To Bixia Sect. I'm taking you back to your sect and forefathers."

He groped for the object the abbot had shoved at him earlier—a small wooden plaque. On one side was carved the words "Bixia Sect" and on the

other was a single character, “Zhu.” It must have been the abbot’s proof of identity back at Bixia Sect.

After gently stroking the plaque for a while, he handed it to Shiwu. “This is something your shifu left to you. You must keep it safe.”

For a long time, Shiwu only looked at it with a cherishing gaze. Then he gave it a few more strokes and carefully slipped it into his lapel, as if afraid he’d lose it the moment he stopped paying attention.

Shen Qiao took the boy’s hand and led him away. The two of them waded through the brush, continuing onward.

Shiwu couldn’t help but glance back the way they’d come.

Behind them, the stone door lay tucked beneath layers and layers of dense vegetation. Hidden securely away, it was like it’d never existed.

Tears streamed down Shiwu’s cheeks once more.

Shen Qiao squeezed his hand tightly.

***

Bixia Sect was on Mount Tai, and Mount Tai was in Dongping Commandery. One could travel straight through Ji Province to get there, but Shen Qiao was afraid that Hehuan Sect would guess where they were going, so he took Shiwu southward into Liang Province. It was a long detour that almost doubled the length of their journey.

Shiwu became quiet and reserved, no longer his former shy yet friendly self. He rarely spoke when they encountered other people. Shen Qiao knew what the trouble was, but he also knew his advice couldn’t solve it. All he could do was wait for Shiwu to resolve it himself.

The abbot had hidden some copper coins in the cellar. Though it wasn’t much, with some frugality it would be enough to last their entire journey to Dongping Commandery.

They hurried along during the day and stayed inside the cities at night. If there wasn’t a city nearby, they did their best to search for one of the livelier towns. As the saying went, “a true hermit secludes themselves

within the markets”—the more people they were among, the less likely they were to be found.

Evening fell as they strode into western Yan Province. Shen Qiao found them an inn to stay at inside the city. There was just one bed, which he gave to Shiwu while he himself meditated, cultivating.

After he’d rebuilt his foundations with the *Zhuyang Strategy*, Shen Qiao seemed to enter an entirely brand-new, completely unknown world.

A world that possessed scant inches of space, but where every detail shone clear. With his heart tranquil and at peace, the beautiful mysteries of nature made themselves apparent.

True qi flowed through his damaged meridians, sending pain twinging through him. But with it came regeneration—even the many traumatic injuries he’d suffered in the past seemed to slowly heal.

This was what was truly profound about the *Zhuyang Strategy*.

Where his inner awareness reached, the light of dawn dappled the trees as the bright moon sank behind rooftops. The plum flowers concealed divine secrets as they furtively ripened into bloom.

Juque, Zhongting, Huagai, Xuanji—one by one, his blocked acupoints and damaged meridians were made clear again. The stuffiness and muffled pain that had long choked his chest slowly faded too, bit by bit.

Shen Qiao’s eyes were tightly shut. He was completely aware that another pair of eyes had been secretly glancing his way.

Wrapped in his blanket, Shiwu—who’d supposedly dozed off some time ago—lay motionless. He was pretending to sleep, but his eyes were open just a crack.

So he saw Shen Qiao, who’d been fine only a moment before, suddenly hack up a mouthful of blood. Everything else flew from his mind as he threw aside his blanket and rolled off the bed, dashing to Shen Qiao’s side.

“What’s wrong?” he cried. “Are you all right?”

Shen Qiao opened his eyes and shook his head with a smile. “This is stagnant blood. It’s best to cough it up.”

Shiwu's eyes glistened with tears. "You don't need to comfort me! I know you didn't buy any medicine during our journey, all to save money… Your injuries were so terrible when I saved you, you were almost on the verge of death!"

"It's true that I avoided buying medicine to save money, but I'm already slowly recovering by using my internal cultivation. I'll be fine, regardless of whether I take medicine."

"Really?"

Shen Qiao stroked his head. "Really. I promised your shifu to take good care of you. So I won't leave you alone."

Shiwu threw his arms around Shen Qiao and started bawling. "I…I wasn't ignoring you on purpose… I was only…only just too sad!"

Shen Qiao's eyes prickled with moisture. "I know." He patted Shiwu's back gently. "I'm sorry."

Shiwu shook his head. "Please don't say you're sorry. It wasn't your fault."

Shen Qiao smiled bitterly. "How was it not my fault? They came to kill me, and all of you were dragged into it."

"They were so savage, it'd turn out the same if you weren't there. As long as they thought Shifu was hiding you, they'd kill him just the same. Shifu chose to save you, just like I chose to save you. None of us blame you for it, so you shouldn't blame yourself either. All right? The ones who should be punished are the evil people, not the good people."

Shen Qiao's heart was pained and grieved. *Zhu-xiong, oh Zhu-xiong,* he thought to himself. *Your spirit in heaven can surely rest seeing Shiwu so mature and thoughtful.*

"Would you like to learn martial arts?" he asked Shiwu.

Shiwu nodded. "I want to study martial arts properly. That way, I can get revenge for Shifu and Chuyi."

"I can teach you Xuandu Mountain's martial arts on the way to Bixia Sect. How about it?"

Shiwu's eyes shone. "Xuandu Mountain? The number one Daoist sect in the world? That Xuandu Mountain?"

Shen Qiao nodded.

"Were you a disciple of Xuandu Mountain, Shen-langjun?"

"Yes," said Shen Qiao, smiling. "I am Shen Qiao, a personal disciple of the sixth generation's sect leader of Xuandu Mountain, Qi Fengge."

Shiwu gasped. "I…I think I heard Shifu mention your name before! You used to be the sect leader, right?"

Shen Qiao stroked the boy's head some more. "Yes. It's a long and complicated tale, so I won't tell it to you just now. But I came to Yecheng to look for some Xuandu Mountain disciples who were heading north. But who could have expected…"

He paused, then continued, "Who could have expected that I'd meet Sang Jingxing. What happened after, you already know."

Shiwu said awkwardly, "But Shifu once told us…every sect's martial arts are close-kept secrets, never to be revealed. You can't learn their martial arts unless you join their sect. And I've already promised Shifu that I'd go to Bixia Sect, so…"

Smiling, Shen Qiao said, "Whether it's Xuandu Mountain or Bixia Sect, martial arts exist for people to learn them. If both the teacher and the student care little for the differences between sect, why cling to such rules? I'm only teaching you martial arts. You don't have to take me as your master."

He then took out Shanhe Tongbei, unraveling the tightly wound black cloth that disguised it as a bamboo cane. He peeled off each strip of cloth, layer by layer.

"Shanhe…Tongbei?" Curious, Shiwu read the characters carved upon it.

"When the common people suffer, the mountains and rivers grieve in pain. The grass and trees hold souls, all within heaven and earth's eternal reign."[22]

Shen Qiao spoke slowly, running his fingers over the sheath. Suddenly, he clutched the hilt and swiftly drew the sword. His wrist barely

twitched, but the room was brimming with a brilliant radiance in an instant. The sword's glare seemed to stretch to every corner, its murderous intent dominating every space. Like cranes calling and soaring high above or wild geese cutting through the snowy passes down below.

But then another second passed, and the brilliance vanished, returning to nothing.

The room was still the same room, the sword was still the same sword. It was as if the vision had only been Shiwu's hallucination.

Shiwu was frozen there for a while, gaping. He looked completely dumbfounded.

Shen Qiao smiled at him. "Go touch that robe."

He was referring to his own outer robe. As it'd been soaked by the rain on their way here, he'd removed and hung it upon a wooden rack in their room.

The moment Shiwu's fingers touched the robe, a sound of surprise escaped him.

The robe disintegrated into tiny flakes which drifted to the floor.

Save for the robe, everything else in the room was completely unaffected.

Shiwu's expression went from dumbfounded to utterly stupefied.

"What do you think?"

"A…amazing…"

A laugh sputtered from Shen Qiao. "I was asking if you wanted me to teach you martial arts!"

Shiwu nodded convulsively. "Praise be to Shen-shi,[23] please accept Shiwu's respects!"

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Chapter 48:
Shanhe Tongbei

"XUANDU'S VIOLET PALACE used to have many sets of sword techniques until my shifu Qi Fengge took over. He believed that all martial arts shared the same roots, regardless of how many superficial changes they amassed. Rather than getting caught up in the complexity and ending up with too much to learn, it's better to hone a single set of techniques to the pinnacle of perfection. So, he reorganized our many generations of sword techniques, and in the end, only two remained.

"One of them is the Azure Waves sword technique, which he crafted by the East Sea. He saw the sunrise and moonfall, the drifting clouds atop the roiling sea, and he folded all of these experiences into his creation. Then he mixed in the essence of some of Xuandu Mountain's traditional sword techniques. As we happen to be passing by the Yellow River today, we'll be privy to a similar frame of mind. I'll demonstrate the sword techniques to you once—you needn't strain to memorize the moves. Just allow yourself to thoroughly experience the feelings within them."

Shiwu had on a very serious face. Earnestly, he cupped his hands. "Yes, Shen-shi, this disciple will do his best to feel them."

Shen Qiao smiled, and then he drew his sword!

The stretch of river near where they stood had breached its dike just the year before, flooding the farmland on both sides.

Even today, most of the houses remained empty—there was desolation as far as the eye could see. Only the great tides of the Yellow River endured, rushing tirelessly onward as before.

At this moment, Shen Qiao stood atop a solitary, jutting rock. Beneath him swept the ceaseless surges of the Yellow River, roaring like it wanted to devour all that was in the world.

The river waters sparkled and gleamed beneath the sunlight, crystal-bright and roiling. Shen Qiao's lone figure looked so small and frail, defenseless against nature's might. But the moment he drew his sword, his

aura was as radiant as the river’s. Shanhe Tongbei reflected a dazzling brilliance, and as the blade rose, its sword qi overflowed. It stirred the river waters to surge ever-higher, and Shen Qiao was engulfed in the sword qi, looking elegant and poised beyond compare, like an immortal on the brink of soaring to the heavens.

Shiwu watched, overcome with wonder.

The abbot had taught them martial arts, but the man's abilities were only average. It was hard for him to describe what truly profound martial arts looked like. He'd heard the abbot explain that a true master of martial arts could move their very surroundings, influence every blade of grass beneath heaven, and could even affect them with only their mind.

Chuyi and Shiwu were completely captivated by his words and longed to see such things themselves. "If only I could witness that kind of master one day," they'd thought.

And now the scene he'd dreamed of was playing out right before his eyes.

Shiwu had only just started on the path to martial arts—he wasn't even in sight of the gateway to them. But even he, as he watched Shen Qiao's each and every move, could feel the sheer power moving nature itself. It was a picture beyond what his limited vocabulary could describe, but it was also a sight he'd never forget for his entire life.

Shifu, Chuyi, did you see it?

Hot tears brimmed in Shiwu's eyes. He felt the impulse to kneel and bawl his heart out.

Even as Shiwu watched from off to the side, the one standing in the center, Shen Qiao, had entered into something indescribably profound.

He could feel his sword qi and the river waters invisibly influencing each other, each driving the other on. His sword intent flowed through his entire body before gushing forth from Shanhe Tongbei in his hand. His heart followed his thoughts, and his sword followed his heart. The fully formed sword intent transformed into an arc of white light, piercing straight through the dense haze of vapor. Wherever the sword intent fell, the river waters exploded with a thunderous roar. Water droplets sprayed out, sparkling with the colors of the rainbow. It was a magnificent sight.

The point of Shen Qiao's sword quivered. Abruptly and without warning, he sprang from the rock. Though he'd been enthralled just a moment ago, Shiwu yelled at the sight and ran to the riverbank. But as Shen Qiao swiftly descended into the turbulent waters, his sword didn't stop—it moved unceasingly, free and unrestrained. As if he were only strolling through a courtyard, plucking flowers with his sword.

The Yellow River, which had never stopped for anyone, which hungered to devour everything in its path, kept galloping onward beneath Shen Qiao. But in the one-meter radius around him, it became as gentle as the moonlight's touch upon a breeze: leaving all unstirred, letting everything come and go.

Spring comes not from heaven but from my hands.

The rushing waters are heartless, while my sword is warmhearted.

With my warmhearted sword, I gallop through the heartless waters, alone I brace the thousand storms, continuing ever onward.

Where my sword glare falls, I obtain the essence of all beauty.

Having completed the entire set, Shen Qiao leapt from a rock in the river back onto the bank. He looked behind him, squinting—his vision was still rather lacking. Perhaps the lingering poison had stayed too long, too deep within his body, for even as he rebuilt his foundations, his eyes never regained the clarity they'd once had.

But this didn't hinder him. During this demonstration of swordplay, he'd used his innate awareness of the world around him, utilizing his sword intent to maintain a connection with his surroundings. Hence, his steps had been absolutely precise, unaffected by his poor eyesight. He lost some, gained some—it was a blessing in disguise.

Next to him, Shiwu asked timidly, "Shen-shi, is it really possible for me to reach your level one day?"

Shen Qiao stroked the boy's head and smiled. "Of course you can. Many thousand paths spring from the great Dao. Everyone walks their own. As long you study diligently, success will naturally follow."

Shiwu couldn't help but smile.

It was the first time he'd smiled since leaving Bailong Monastery.

Shen Qiao squatted so that their gazes were level. "I know you haven't forgotten your shifu's death. I haven't forgotten either. We'll keep him in our hearts together, but your shifu's spirit in heaven surely wants you to live happily. So promise me, once we pass the Yellow River, let us throw away our sorrows and continue forward in joy. All right?"

At the mention of his shifu, Shiwu's eyes grew moist once more, but he quickly nodded his head. "All right, I'll live on and live well. I'll train hard and become a good person. That way, I won't disappoint Shifu, and I won't disappoint you."

Shen Qiao didn't speak, just held him tightly for a long time. Finally, he released the boy and took his hand. Two figures, one large and one small, walked slowly along the Yellow River, moving ever-forward.

As for the Yellow River, it continued to roar onward, never-changing.

***

Their pace wasn't fast; the journey took them a fair number of months. It was already early August when they arrived at the foot of Mount Tai.

Mount Tai had many peaks, both large and small, totaling over a hundred. Bixia Sect wasn't located on Dai Summit where many generations of kings and emperors had performed their imperial ceremonies of mountain worship, but on a rather unknown peak around the northeast side called Zhunan Peak.

Zhunan Peak wasn't particularly tall, but its environment was auspicious and blessed by nature. Jagged rocks circled its summit, and clear streams murmured atop it. Due to its treacherous landscape, few travelers or woodcutters visited.

The two of them took a short break at the foot of the mountain to rest and prepare, then began their climb.

The closer they got to their destination, the more nervous Shiwu became. He grew fidgety and restless. As Shen Qiao led him up the mountain, he blurted out, "Shen-shi, do you know what kind of sect Bixia Sect is?"

Shen Qiao smiled and answered, "Bixia Sect was founded during the Han Dynasty. These days, it's led by Zhao Chiying. Zhu-xiong said that Sect Leader Zhao is his shizhi, so in terms of seniority, you should be in the same generation."

Shiwu clutched a corner of Shen Qiao's robe, but not because he was afraid of falling. He'd been studying martial arts and swordplay under Shen Qiao for the past few months and had made great progress. He'd already internalized nearly half of Xuandu Mountain's qinggong, "A Rainbow Stretches Across the Heavens."

"Once you bring me to Bixia Sect, will your esteemed self leave?"

"Do you not wish for me to leave?" Shen Qiao deliberately teased him.

Shiwu was a little embarrassed. He gave a close-mouthed smile and didn't answer.

Ever since the abbot and Chuyi passed away, Shen Qiao had been taking attentive care of Shiwu, both as a master and as a father. Shiwu had long grown to see him as his only family, and he admired and adored Shen Qiao deeply. Now that Bixia Sect was right in front of them, his shifu's dying wish would soon be fulfilled. But it came with the prospect of separation, so he couldn't feel happy at all.

"Don't worry," said Shen Qiao. "I won't leave as soon as we arrive. We'll check things out first."

What he hadn't told Shiwu was this: although Bixia Sect had once been a very large and powerful sect, they'd fallen into great decline over the recent years. Only the appearance of Zhao Chiying had boosted their reputation. Zhao Chiying was the kind of legendary talent who appeared once every hundred years, but a single person wasn't enough for a sect to flourish. No matter how strong Zhao Chiying was, reversing such a raging tide proved difficult. Rumor had it that this sect leader had been in secluded cultivation for the past few years, so all sect affairs fell to a shixiong named Yue Kunchi. There must have been a reason Zhu Lengquan had left the sect, and it couldn't be a happy one. Shen Qiao didn't know how they'd react to Shiwu—if they disliked the boy, there was no way he could leave Shiwu there to suffer.

Shiwu didn't know that Shen Qiao was so preoccupied with thinking about Shiwu himself. The boy was nervous and uneasy, first worried that he wouldn't get along with the people of Bixia Sect, then *also* worried that he'd have to separate with Shen Qiao so very soon.

They’d ascended nearly halfway up the mountain in this way when Shen Qiao sensed something strange.

Many sects located on mountain summits had strict safeguards, with disciples stationed around the mountain’s foot, watching. Even the sects with laxer defenses would still have someone posted about halfway up.

But they were already almost to the sect itself and still hadn’t seen even the trace of a person. That certainly wasn’t normal.

Shiwu had also realized something was wrong. The hand clutching Shen Qiao’s robe loosened a little. If something happened, he didn’t want to become the millstone dragging Shen Qiao down.

“Look, Shen-shi!”

Shen Qiao couldn’t see well, but Shiwu had discovered a broken sword left in the brush along the stone path. He bent and picked it up, then handed it to Shen Qiao.

Shen Qiao felt along the break in the sword—it’d been snapped through excessive force. There didn’t seem to be any dead bodies around, so it was hard to say whether its master had fallen from the cliff or run away.

“Be careful,” said Shen Qiao. “There might be more near the top. Stay behind me.”

Sure enough, the higher they climbed, the more weapons they found. Soon, corpses began to appear, one after another. Whether they were Bixia Sect disciples or not was unclear.

Just then, a distant shout came from behind them. “Who goes there?! Halt!”

Before they’d finished speaking, they swung a sword at Shiwu’s back!

Shen Qiao heard the voice. His expression unchanged, he grabbed Shiwu and turned, swapping their positions in the blink of an eye. Then he himself went to welcome the blade.

He didn’t draw Shanhe Tongbei but sent a palm strike to knock the blade aside and off-course. With a flap and a furl of his sleeve, he caught the attacker’s wrist.

“Daoist Master Shen?” said the astonished attacker.

“Who is this distinguished master?” Shen Qiao squinted but could only make out a person’s silhouette before him, their features unclear.

“This one is Fan Yuanbai, a disciple of Bixia Sect. We’ve met once before, in the Su residence,” they said.

Shen Qiao thought for a moment, and a faint impression came to him. Back when he’d attended Madam Qin’s birthday banquet in place of Yan Wushi, he had indeed met a disciple from Bixia Sect.

“May this one ask why Daoist Master Shen is here?” said Fan Yuanbai.

There was obvious disquiet in his voice, but he’d endured it to politely ask after Shen Qiao. Partly because Fan Yuanbai was mild-tempered by nature; partly because he was one of many who’d been impressed with Shen Qiao’s duel against Duan Wenyang.

Shen Qiao briefly explained the connection between Shiwu and Bixia Sect. He even had Shiwu show him the wooden plaque as proof.

Fan Yuanbai accepted the wooden plaque and examined it for a moment. “Indeed, I’ve heard of Zhu-shishuzu,[24] though when it comes to what happened, I know little of the details. Given that, would the two of you mind coming with me up the mountain? This way, I can report the matter to my master and elders.”

“Thank you, Fan-langjun,” said Shen Qiao. “Just now we saw many broken swords and bodies along the way. Surely you know what’s happening atop the mountain?”

Fan Yuanbai smiled bitterly. “It’s quite the coincidence. For the past six months I was home visiting my family, and I’ve only returned to the sect today. The moment I arrived at the foot of the mountain, I realized something was wrong. The disciples on duty there were nowhere to be seen. I ran up the mountain, stricken by panic and alarm, then happened to encounter the two of you. I thought…”

He’d thought them to be enemies, not allies.

“If that’s the case,” said Shen Qiao, “let’s not waste any more time here. We’ll hurry up to see what happened. If nothing’s wrong, that would

at least put our hearts at ease.”

Fan Yuanbai quickly concurred and joined Shen Qiao and Shiwu in their journey up the mountain.

But the higher they climbed, the more on edge they became, as if their hearts were suspended above an abyss. For as they went farther, all they saw were more and more swords and corpses. Fan Yuanbai held fast to his composure at first—he even bent to examine the bodies and check if anyone was still alive. But by the end of their journey, his face and lips were bloodless and pale, and he was unable to utter a single word.

With Fan Yuanbai, Shen Qiao and Shiwu learned that there were Bixia Sect disciples among the dead—the majority of them, in fact. It wasn’t clear who the other corpses were, but on their weapons—they’d also used swords—were carved the characters “Dongzhou.”

Perplexed, Shiwu asked, “What kind of sect is Dongzhou?”

As a newcomer to the jianghu, he assumed his ignorance was due to his limited understanding, but unexpectedly, Fan Yuanbai only frowned, unspeaking.

Instead, Shen Qiao answered. “There’s no Dongzhou Sect in the Central Plains, but there is one in Goguryeo.”

Only then did Fan Yuanbai say, “That’s right. They claim to be the largest sect in Goguryeo. I’ve heard of them too. But Goguryeo is a foreign country—they’ve never had anything to do with Bixia Sect. Why would they show up here?”

The conversation didn’t slow them down. The mountain summit loomed closer and closer, and they could already hear the clash of blades drifting across the distance.

Shen Qiao even caught the sound of people yelling and cursing.

Fan Yuanbai put on some speed, running up ahead with his sword already drawn.

Shiwu tugged at Shen Qiao. “Shen-shi,” he whispered, “you can follow behind me. There are a lot of dead bodies on the ground.”

Warmth flooded Shen Qiao’s heart, and he nodded, accepting the boy’s kind gesture. “All right.”

He’d mentally braced himself, but what Fan Yuanbai saw still sent agony spearing through his heart.

His sect, once so calm and peaceful, had been transformed into a sea of blood. Inside the sect gates were scores more corpses, their blood pooling into narrow streams that slowly trickled away and out of sight.

For Shiwu, who hadn’t yet joined Bixia Sect, the deaths of the sect’s disciples were not personal. With Shen Qiao at his side, he could still keep a calm and composed face. But for Fan Yuanbai, it was almost too much. These were the martial siblings with whom he’d spent each day from dawn to dusk, who were as close to him as his real family. Some of them had even teased him before he’d left, fussing that they wanted him to bring them back some treats or toys, yet now they could only lie on the icy ground, never to speak again.

Fan Yuanbai’s eyes were red, his grief and hatred slowly mounting. When he saw two groups of people battling each other in the distance, he gripped his sword and charged forward without the slightest hesitation. But just as he was about to enter the fray, he froze.

Both factions of fighters were dressed in the clothes of Bixia Sect disciples, and he saw familiar faces on both sides.

“Li-shidi! Qiao-shidi! Stop! What’s going on?!”

But everyone was in the thick of battle, completely absorbed in the fight. No one paid him any attention as the clash of weapons rang out endlessly, dazzling light glinting off their blades.

Fan Yuanbai couldn’t understand what was happening. Why, after a single trip away from the mountain, he’d returned to this scene of his sect slaughtering one another.

The tumult in his heart left him distracted. And so, he failed to notice the sword that thrust toward his back.

But before the ambusher could drive his sword into Fan Yuanbai, he screamed and dropped his weapon, then fell to ground howling and squirming, clutching his wrist.

“Watch out behind you.” Shen Qiao’s voice came from behind, even and composed.

Fan Yuanbai's senses returned a little, and he turned to thank him. Then he yanked up his attacker, only to realize that it was another Bixia Sect disciple.

"Elder Lu's disciple Xue Qi? Why did you attack me?!"

Xue Qiao looked at Shen Qiao, who'd just cut the tendons of his wrist with a single blow. He turned fearful and said, "The…the real sect leader returned…but your shifu, Elder Yue, refuses to step down from his position as acting sect leader. He ordered his disciples to war with us…"

The more Fan Yuanbai heard, the more confused he became. Finally, he had to cut in. "Nonsense! His whole life, my shifu devoted his heart and soul to the common good! Why would he refuse to step down or whatever?!"

"I don't know, I don't know," yelled Xue Qi. "I was acting under orders, don't kill me!"

Shen Qiao put his hand on Fan Yuanbai's shoulder, telling him to calm down. "We're still in the sect's outermost area. Let's head to the inner area and see."

Then he asked Xue Qi, "Where's your shifu?"

He spoke softly, but his voice sounded crisply in Xue Qi's ears. A shudder ran through him. "In the inner area—he's fighting Elder Yue…"

Fan Yuanbai ran out of patience for listening. He leapt forward, grabbing his sword and charging into the inner area.

As he ran, a crowd of armed fighters came to stop him. Some were from his sect, some were from Dongzhou Sect, and there were also some dressed in black who had heavy brows and prominent noses. After a few exchanges of blows, Fan Yuanbai's strength started to flag, and his movements grew clumsier. He was almost hit with a slash, but fortunately Shen Qiao had followed close behind, keeping an eye on him.

Green as he was, Shiwu was handling the situation with much more ease than Fan Yuanbai. The sword he was using was just an ordinary longsword he'd picked up on the way up the mountain, but with his every move, he brought to bear all of Shen Qiao's recent teachings. He felt none of Fan Yuanbai's turmoil, and with Shen Qiao beside him, his mind was

clearer, his movements steadier. In fact, he was taking the charging attackers as nothing more than sparring opponents.

But Shiwu was still only a novice, after all. He started out a little clumsy and flustered. When, after great effort, he finally subdued an enemy, he rushed to turn his head, seeking an approving smile from the person behind him. “Shen-shi, how did I do?”

And Shen Qiao really did smile. “Very well,” he said. “But you must be careful.”

He brushed his hand gently over the boy’s shoulder, leaving behind a blooming trace of warmth. Greatly encouraged, Shiwu said, “Yes!”

In the inner area, Yue Kunchi’s sword flew from his hand when Ruan Hailou slammed a palm into his waist, forcing Yue Kunchi to stumble three steps back and crash into a pillar.

He paid no heed to the nearby disciples who rushed to help him, nor did he look at Ruan Hailou. Instead, he roared at Sect Elder Lu Feng. “Lu Feng, how dare you collude with outsiders to assault Bixia Sect? You traitorous, evil bastard! You don’t deserve to be a disciple of Bixia Sect!”

Lu Feng scowled. “You don’t get to decide what I deserve or don’t, Yue Kunchi. That’s for Sect Leader Zhao to tell us.”

Yue Kunchi grit his teeth. Lu Feng’s faction obviously knew that Zhao-shimei was in secluded cultivation and couldn’t tolerate even the slightest disturbance. They’d timed their attack to coincide with her seclusion.

“When you were young, your shifu’s scolding often had you in tears,” said Ruan Hailou. “I was the one who ran down the mountain to buy you sweets. When your shifu called you a fool, I was the one who took you by the hand and taught you all those moves. I trust you’ve forgotten all about that?”

“I didn’t forget,” said Yue Kunchi. “I’ll remember the kindness Ruan-shishu showed me for the rest of my life! But now you’re a member of Dongzhou Sect—you even married a Goguryeo princess. You brought these Dongzhou Sect disciples here and slaughtered your way into Bixia Sect, and you colluded with the Göktürks and our sect elders, intent on the leader’s seat. Is this how you treat your own sect?!”

Ruan Hailou sneered. “If your shifu hadn’t stabbed me in the back, subjected me to public castigation, exiled me from my own sect, and forced me to flee in despair, then I never would have ended up in Goguryeo. Of course, you wouldn’t care how much I suffered before I caught the Dongzhou Sect Leader’s eye. I became his personal disciple, and twenty years passed in a blink. It’s unfortunate your shifu has already passed on—I’d have been more than happy to seek justice from him!”

Pu Anmi, who’d been watching from the sidelines for a while, broke in. “Say, why are you telling him so much, Ruan-gong and Lu-gong? Zhao Chiying is stuck in seclusion, so Yue Kunchi holds sway as acting sect leader. I can only imagine how pleased he is about that. Of course he isn’t willing to step down. We’ve already killed all these people, so let’s just finish the job and do away with anyone who won’t listen to us. Once Zhao Chiying’s the only one left, she won’t be able to stop us, even when she does leave seclusion.”

“He’s right,” said Lu Feng flatly. “Yue Kunchi’s strength is almost spent, Ruan-shixiong. He’s just talking nonsense to buy time. Let’s depose him first—Hui Leshan owes you quite a bit, and now it’s his disciple’s turn for payback!”

Ruan Hailou spoke no more. He lunged forward and struck at Yue Kunchi.

His strength completely exhausted, Yue Kunchi had nowhere to retreat. He could only close his eyes and wait for death. His disciple Zhou Yexue leapt from his side, trying to block the blow for her master.

Fan Yuanbei stumbled onto the scene in time to see this play out. Seized by terror and panic, he screamed, “Shimei!”

The distance between them was too far. Even if he flung himself over, it was impossible to reach her in time.

Just at that moment, a shining sword glare swept past his ear and pierced right between Ruan Hailou and Zhou Yexue.

It happened too fast for anyone to react.

Ruan Hailou was already halfway through his strike. The sight filled him with alarm, but it was too late to withdraw. With all the majesty of a

king descending from heaven, the sword glare screamed forth and quelled his palm blast.

Pain seared through his palm, and he quickly retreated. He landed on the ground and looked down to see a long, bloody gash gored deep into his palm.

Nearly all the Bixia Sect disciples who were present had been either killed or injured during the battle in the inner area, and the remainder were all worn down and listless, unable to collect themselves. And so no one had realized Shen Qiao's strike had come with a fully formed sword intent—in fact, it approached the echelon of sword heart. The likes of Ruan Hailou had been able to tell, but he'd never lift his enemy's spirits by saying so.

"Who are you?!" Ruan Hailou snarled as he held the weeping gash on his hand.

"Shen Qiao." He returned his sword to his sheath, his voice quiet and gentle, but it sounded clearly in everyone's ears.

Most people didn't show any particular response, but Pu Anmi's expression filled with horror, as if he'd seen a ghost. "You're Shen Qiao?!"

"It seems this young master recognizes me. May I ask for your esteemed name?"

Pu Anmi silently repeated to himself that it was impossible. Then he pulled himself together and offered a smile. "My master is Kunye. I trust that Daoist Master Shen is familiar with him."

Shen Qiao had excellent self-control—he showed little reaction to the name of the opponent who'd thrown him off a cliff and left him grievously injured. With a slight nod, he said, "An old friend indeed."

Having brought up his shifu's name, Pu Anmi's confidence returned. "Ever since that battle on Banbu Peak, my master has missed Daoist Master Shen dearly. He even worried that you might have died from the fall. Fortunately, Daoist Master Shen overcame disaster through the blessings of heaven. My master isn't far from here; I trust that he'll be on the mountain by tomorrow. Then there can be a reunion between old friends, and Daoist Master Shen can catch up with my master properly!"

At the name Banbu Peak, most people there realized who Shen Qiao was.

All Shiwu knew was that some of the gazes directed at Shen Qiao angered him greatly. He couldn't help but frown to himself, stepping forward a little to block those eyes.

Shen Qiao seemed to sense Shiwu's thoughts. He smiled a little and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, his voice still gentle and mild. "Indeed, there should be a proper reunion between old friends."

He then changed the topic. "I trust you're not all here because of me, so I must ask you to resolve the matter at hand first."

"Even in Goguryeo, I heard of Daoist Master Shen," Ruan Hailou said coldly. "It's truly a pleasure to meet you today. However, these are Bixia Sect's internal affairs, and Daoist Master Shen has no reason to interfere. May I ask why you're here?"

If it were anyone else, Ruan Hailou would have made the first attack in a bid for the upper hand long ago. But Shen Qiao's move had thoroughly shaken the audience, and it made him wary.

Shen Qiao sighed. "I have no intention of interfering with Bixia Sect's internal matters. However I came here today to return a junior to his sect and forefathers. Surely I cannot simply stand by and watch you massacre the entire sect?"

Yue Kunchi was confused. "Daoist Master Shen, who is this junior you speak of?"

Shen Qiao briefly explained Shiwu's background. Yue Kunchi gasped and blurted out, "He's Zhu-shishu's disciple?!"

From the sidelines, Ruan Hailou burst into laughter. "Good! Very good! Seems like today's a good day. All our old friends have gathered here. Zhu Lengquan didn't come himself, but he sent us his disciple! If he were still here, I'd ask him to say a couple of words, for the sake of justice. Tell us which is the truth: was Hui Leshan devoid of compassion and righteousness, or did I really deserve to be expelled from the sect?!"

Yue Kunchi slowly exhaled a lungful of stagnant air. "Ruan-shishu, this will be the last time I call you Shishu. Before my master passed away,

he too mentioned what happened between you, and I could hear the awful regret in his voice. He must have thought that he'd made many mistakes back then too—he even told me that, if I were to ever see you again, I must respectfully greet you as Shishu, just the same as before. But those were the past generation's grudges. Even if you care little for your fellow sect members, you should remember the great favor the sect did in raising you. But today, you even…even…"

He looked at the corpses strewn across the ground, at the sheer desolation all around him. He found it difficult to continue, and his voice dropped low with anguish. "What wrong have the disciples of Bixia Sect committed? They didn't see that happen, and they weren't involved. So why did they have to die?! Lu Feng, you were an elder. Yet you colluded with outsiders…"

Irritated, Lu Feng cut him off. "Enough, I've always hated the way you kick up a fuss! If Zhao Chiying were willing to give a little more attention to sect administration, Bixia Sect wouldn't have fallen to the deplorable state we're in now! Those people died because they were incompetent. So what if they're dead?! If you're sensible, you'll hand over the leadership right now. No matter who takes over Bixia Sect in the future, we'd be in better hands than yours!"

"And what if I refuse?" said Yue Kunchi.

Pu Anmi laughed. "Zhou is about to invade Qi, ready to charge in like the unstoppable tide. Qi's strength has long faded. Sect Leader Ruan and Elder Lu have already pledged their loyalty to Ishbara Khagan of the Eastern Göktürk Khaganate, and they were both granted government posts and noble titles. If Elder Yue is willing to see things clearly and lead Bixia Sect in paying allegiance to the Khaganate too, then there's a bright future ahead for you."

After that, he seemed to recall something. He turned to Shen Qiao. "I almost forgot to tell Daoist Master Shen, but it's about your shidi, the current Xuandu Mountain Sect Leader Yu. Not long ago, Ishbara Khagan conferred upon him the title of 'Yuyang's Bishop of Great Peace and Perfected Master.' Truly worthy of celebration! If you hadn't lost to my master that day, you'd be the one with the title, no?"

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Chapter 49:
The Incident at Bixia Sect

SHEN QIAO WRINKLED his brows—though not because he lacked a title. “Does that mean that Yu Ai is coming with Kunye to Bixia Sect?”

Pu Anmi laughed. “Perfected Master Yu isn’t coming—only my shizun. If Daoist Master Shen is interested, once my shizun is here, we can go see Ishbara Khagan together. I’m certain the Khagan will be very happy to meet you.”

“This humble Daoist has indeed fallen on hard times, but I haven’t fallen so far that I need to depend on a pillaging, slaughtering bandit.”

Pu Anmi’s smile faded instantly. “Do you know what you’re saying? You think you can look down on whoever you want, just because Yan Wushi is supporting you?”

“I’ve never thought that way,” Shen Qiao said coolly.

Suddenly, another smile spread across Pu Anmi’s face. “You should know—soon Yan Wushi won’t even be able to save himself. You’d be better off pledging allegiance to our powerful and prosperous Khaganate. I can see that Daoist Master Shen has already regained most of his martial arts—Ishbara Khagan has a great love of talent, and if you serve under him, he’s sure to grant you a glorious position. Then you could stand on equal footing with your shidi and compete with him as a proper rival.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” said Shen Qiao. “But I must decline.”

Anger flared in Pu Anmi at Shen Qiao’s refusal to bend to neither threat nor reward. Just as he was about to try again, Lu Feng, who’d been driven to impatient irritation on the sidelines, spoke up. “Pu-langjun, can’t you leave your grudges for another day? Let’s deal with Bixia Sect’s situation first, lest our delays cause even more problems!”

Pu Anmi nodded and looked to Ruan Hailou. “I will follow Sect Leader Ruan’s opinion on this matter. What does Sect Leader Ruan think?”

Ruan Hailou was now a member of Dongzhou Sect. His official rank there was quite high, and he'd married the daughter of the King of Goguryeo, making him rather well placed. The Eastern Khaganate wanted to take advantage of Zhou's invasion of Qi to seize a good chunk of Qi's land in the east. This was in perfect harmony with Goguryeo's interests, so the two countries had already discussed how to divide up the territory. As Zhou invaded from the west with all its military might and Qi rushed to quell the flames, Goguryeo and the Khaganate could effortlessly claim Qi's land in the east.

As for the matter of the Bixia Sect, it was only a small, unremarkable piece of all these schemes—it had nothing to do with the greater picture. Ruan Hailou, now son-in-law of the King of Goguryeo, had pledged allegiance to the Khaganate, and so the Khaganate needed to show him respect. Hence, when he went to Bixia Sect to settle old grudges, they'd followed and lent him their support.

"I'll give you one last chance," Ruan Hailou said to Yue Kunchi. "Surrender now, and I'll spare your life."

Yue Kunchi panted, clutching his chest. "Bixia Sect's legacy has been passed down through generation after generation! Our sect may not be famous, but within us lies our forefathers' blood and soul! As one of Bixia Sect's disciples, I cannot bring shame upon them. I would rather die than surrender!"

Ruan Hailou burst into loud laughter. "Excellent! Hui Leshan was a treacherous, petty scoundrel, but he accepted a disciple with a spine of iron! I shall grant your wish!"

He was still apprehensive about Shen Qiao's earlier intervention, though. He glanced to the side, about to say something. Pu Anmi seemed to understand his concerns. In the next moment, he inserted himself between Shen Qiao and Yue Kunchi. "Let me see just how much of Daoist Master Shen's martial arts have returned!"

Kunye was highly honored and well respected. He was Hulugu's personal disciple and also the Khaganate's Wise King of the Left. Pu Anmi was Kunye's first disciple and also came from a noble family in the Khaganate. He'd always thought highly of himself. Though he'd seen Shen Qiao's sword qi just now, he didn't take it too seriously. After all, everyone

knew how gravely Shen Qiao had been injured, and there was no cure for Joyful Reunion. When they'd spoken, he'd noticed the haziness in Shen Qiao's eyes, evidence of his ailing vision. He'd drawn his conclusions.

He immediately struck out with a harsh, killing blow. By attacking first, he hoped to seize the initiative and eliminate this new variable—this Shen Qiao.

Pu Anmi's weapon was a saber. His saber techniques were incredibly imperious, like a lone wolf upon a grassy plain. One flash of his saber could strike fear into anyone's heart—all who heard it shuddered and longed to flee.

His saber slashed down, its vast might closing in from above like a mountain, leaving those beneath it gasping for breath.

His strike was swift as lightning, but by the time it fell, Shen Qiao was gone. He'd already moved three steps back, avoiding the murderous blade.

But his retreat didn't fill Pu Anmi with pride because Shen Qiao hadn't drawn his sword.

What did it mean to not draw one's sword?

It meant that Shen Qiao didn't find the situation urgent enough to draw his weapon. It also meant he thought he didn't need a sword to deal with someone like Pu Anmi.

Pu Anmi's expression twisted, and he seethed with humiliation.

This Shen Qiao, he thought, was far too arrogant.

Once, you lost to my master, but now you look down on me?

What gives you the right to look down on me?

His first blow had missed, so a second one had to follow. While his thoughts turned, Pu Anmi leapt forward and the glare from his saber surged. It didn't scream from above like his previous attack—this time, it came on like towering waves that swelled inward. Though it looked like only one attack, he'd actually fired six blasts of qi from his saber, each more powerful than the last.

A saber master his age would have to be extraordinarily talented to be capable of creating four of five bursts of qi, yet Pu Anmi had fired six. One could scarcely blame him for being so confident and self-assured.

Shen Qiao finally drew his sword.

Shanhe Tongbei hummed as it emerged from its sheath. Perhaps it was resonating with the saber qi, or perhaps the constant nourishment of sword qi from Shen Qiao had given the blade a soul of its own, and now it was raring to greet the enemy.

Shiwu's eyes went round in surprise. He recognized this as one of the moves Shen Qiao had used during his demonstration of the Azure Waves sword technique, back on the bank of the Yellow River.

"The Cool Breeze Gently Blows"!

The bright moon dips behind the pines, a wind rises unbidden in the forest. A man sits beneath a pine, his back straight as the trunk itself. He plucks the guqin, and from this careless motion, a cool breeze is born, wafting gently against his face, carrying petals that drift like rain.

The move struck with such speed, yet it had such a poetic, picturesque name. Shiwu didn't understand at first, but when he saw Shen Qiao's effortless manner, he realized something.

This one sword strike blew away all six blasts of saber qi!

Pu Anmi couldn't believe his eyes. For a brief moment he froze, but then Shen Qiao's sword was right before his eyes, aiming straight at his face.

Pu Anmi's only option was to withdraw his saber and retreat. Shen Qiao pressed close in pursuit—an uncharacteristic tactic for him. As one advanced and the other retreated, they traversed Bixia Sect's entire inner area in an instant. Right as his back was about to slam into the wall, Pu Anmi used his momentum to leap onto one of the ceiling rafters, then swung from it upside down and slashed at Shen Qiao with his saber once more.

Some distance away, Yue Kunchi was being completely outmatched by Ruan Hailou. Not only was Ruan Hailou a generation higher than him in seniority, but Yue Kunchi's martial abilities were barely above average.

He’d only been entrusted with managing sect affairs because Zhao Chiying was in seclusion. With his days bursting with myriad duties, he’d neglected his training more and more. Of course he was weaker than Ruan Hailou. In only a moment, he fell to the ground and coughed up blood, injured.

This time, Ruan Hailou had no intention of leaving him any room to escape. He lifted his palm, readying a killing blow.

The only two people on the scene still capable of fighting were Fan Yuanbai and Zhou Yexue, but they were occupied with Lu Feng.
The remainder were only mediocre practitioners, incapable of coming to Yue Kunchi’s aid. So Shiwu braced himself and charged over to block the blow for Yue Kunchi.

Of course, Ruan Hailou didn’t take the boy seriously at all. With a cold laugh and a swing of his sleeve, he tossed Shiwu aside.

Shiwu yelped and fell backward. His sword clattered from his hand to the ground.

Shen Qiao heard the commotion. Even without turning his head, he knew what had happened. With a silent, disappointed sigh, he lamented that a grand sect like Bixia Sect had fallen to such a state. He swept aside Pu Anmi’s saber while turning back to save Yue Kunchi. With a burst of his sword qi, he dispersed Ruan Hailou’s palm blast. In a moment, it’d become Shen Qiao against both Pu Anmi and Ruan Hailou—one versus two.

Pu Anmi gave a mocking laugh. “Daoist Master Shen is truly too capable! Everything is up to you!”

Ever since Pu Anmi had seen that he couldn’t use Shen Qiao, he’d decided to kill him. Now that Ruan Hailou had joined him, he was under much less pressure, and he no longer hesitated—every slash of his saber was swung to kill. Eight blasts of qi surged from his saber toward Shen Qiao, powerful enough to overturn the mountains and oceans alike.

The bystanders only saw how Shen Qiao now had to handle both the impenetrable qi of Pu Anmi’s saber as well as Ruan Hailou’s fierce and billowing palm blasts. Outnumbered like this, no matter how powerful of a martial artist Shen Qiao was, it was likely to spread him completely thin—it’d be hard to keep up.

Shiwu's heart had leapt into his throat. He didn't dare make a sound, terrified of distracting Shen Qiao and disturbing his ability to judge by ear. His fists were tightly clenched, and he was soaked in sweat without his notice.

Shen Qiao struck with his sword.

The force of his slash was enough to sweep away everything before it. Where his blade fell, sword qi exploded outward, snow-white as it tore through the sky.

After this strike, he immediately retreated. With a tap of his toes, he soared through the air—this was Xuandu Mountain's "A Rainbow Stretches Across the Heavens" executed to the utmost. A split second later, he vanished from everyone's sight, and when he appeared again, it was behind Ruan Hailou. Pu Anmi's saber fell to the ground, a long, bloody gash now scored into his wrist. Yet he didn't even glance at the wound, his expression still full of disbelief, as if in utter denial that he'd lost.

Ruan Hailou was a little better off in comparison. He withdrew his palm quickly enough, and instead of wasting more time on Shen Qiao, he turned back to killing Yue Kunchi.

But Shen Qiao intervened again. Resentful anger filled Ruan Hailou's heart, but all he could do was go on fighting Shen Qiao, fury written all over his face. "Do you know just how shameless and despicable Yue Kunchi's shifu was? By helping him now, you're only helping the wicked, refusing to tell black from white!"

"I don't know the details of the quarrel between you, and I have no right to intervene," Shen Qiao said severely. "But do you really believe that the Bixia Sect disciples whose corpses litter the ground should pay the price for your grudge?"

"Everyone in Bixia Sect owes me," snarled Ruan Hailou. "I endured everything in silence for more than ten years. Hui Leshan is already dead, so what's wrong with making his successors pay in his place?!"

Shen Qiao spoke no more.

If someone's heart was steeped in hatred, no amount of explanation or advice they were offered would get through. Furthermore, Ruan Hailou

had allied himself with the Khaganate and slaughtered almost everyone in Bixia Sect. It was obvious he had no desire to end things peacefully.

They exchanged blows, moving faster and faster. Although Ruan Hailou wasn't well known in the martial arts circles of the Central Plains, he wasn't someone easily dealt with. In his youth, he'd been the most talented disciple in Bixia Sect. Afterward, he left the sect for some reason and went to Goguryeo, then reestablished himself in Dongzhou Sect, rising to become one of their elders. He'd ascended to the ranks of first-rate martial experts.

Though Shen Qiao's foundations had been rebuilt, it was impossible to return to his old level overnight. He only had a little over half the strength he'd held at his peak. But without the lingering poison and his old injuries, his movements became more deft and relaxed than ever, no longer tinged with the fear of future consequences.

The fight between the two blazed like fire on old tinder, leaving Shen Qiao with no attention left for anything else. Seeing this, Pu Anmi's thoughts took a sudden turn. After briefly assessing the battle situation with narrowed eyes, he waited until Shen Qiao turned to deal with Ruan Hailou's palm strike, then suddenly drew his saber and slashed at Shen Qiao's back!

"Shen-shi!"

"Careful, Daoist Master Shen!"

There came a chorus of shouts—Yue Kunchi and Shiwu's were among them. They'd been closely watching the battle, so naturally they both saw Pu Anmi strike.

Unfortunately, one of them was gravely injured, and the other lacked the skill to help. Shiwu even leapt up and ran over, but he was only a novice martial artist—how could he block Pu Anmi's attack? The saber was already mere inches from Shen Qiao's back!

A gust of cool wind blew in from whereabouts unknown, carrying a faint fragrance with it. Before Shiwu realized what was going on, he blinked and saw what looked like a bright blue sash floating by before his eyes.

Pu Anmi's saber didn't connect with Shen Qiao. Instead, it landed in a fair and slender hand. It looked like the newcomer had caught the blade

barehanded, but there was actually a thin layer of true qi between hand and blade. A palm struck Pu Anmi's body, sending him careening backward. The tiles beneath his feet splintered with his stumbling steps, the shards flying everywhere. He fell back and back until he reached the entranceway.

"Zhao Chiying?" Pu Anmi guessed the newcomer's identity straight away.

"Yes," the woman in blue said. She quickly lunged forward, pressing toward Pu Anmi with every step. A short moment later, she'd snatched away Pu Anmi's saber and sealed his acupoints.

Zhao Chiying took a few more steps forward and helped Yue Kunchi off the ground. "Is Shixiong all right?" she asked in concern.

Yue Kunchi smiled bitterly. "I'm fine. But I was useless, and now all your work was for naught."

Zhao Chiying shook her head but said no more. When she saw that Shen Qiao had a slight upper hand over Ruan Hailou, she stayed out of their fight, opting instead to bring Fan Yuanbai and Lu Feng's battle to a close first.

Lu Feng and Ruan Hailou had been in secret communication for quite a while. Lu Feng's help was one of the main reasons Ruan Hailou's assault on Bixia Sect had gone so smoothly. He'd been in Bixia Sect for many years and had built up a group of loyal disciples. But after more than half a day of vicious fighting, he'd also suffered great losses. Now there were only a few people left still battling Fan Yuanbai and the rest. Even so, with the support of Dongzhou Sect and Pu Anmi, Lu Feng had been almost certain he could seize the position of Bixia Sect's leader today as long as nothing went wrong.

Who could have foreseen that Zhao Chiying would emerge at this moment, when she should have been at a critical junction in her secluded cultivation?

Fan Yuanbai and Zhou Yexue were covered in wounds. They were hanging on by a thread, their strength long spent. But sure enough, Zhao Chiying's appearance gave them tremendous encouragement, and Lu Feng was furious. Without thinking, he turned his sword on Zhao Chiying, the

glare of his sword blazingly fierce as it roared toward her, wrapped in savage sword qi.

Zhao Chiying held both hands in front of her, drawing the taijitu[25] with her fingertips. Her long, slender fingers curved into a profusion of shapes, each arrestingly lovely. Lu Feng’s expression transformed into alarm, for his longsword was unable to advance even another inch. Under Zhao Chiying’s manipulation, the sword exploded into countless fragments.

“Ahhhh!” With a wretched scream, he was sent flying backward. He crashed into the wall behind him, and the major acupoints all over his body were promptly sealed.

At the other end of the inner grounds, Shen Qiao had also defeated his opponent. With the tendons of his sword hand cut, Ruan Hailou knelt on the ground, his face as pale as ash, Shen Qiao’s sword pressed against his neck.

It was over.

With Lu Feng, Ruan Hailou, and Pu Anmi all defeated and under control, there was little to fear from the rest of the enemies. Bixia Sect’s remaining disciples had found their backbone. They quickly stabilized the situation and rounded up all the members of Dongzhou Sect. However, when they looked at the scene before them, the sect’s disciples littering the ground, their blood flowing in small rivers, none could dredge up the joy of victory. There was only a sense of heaviness and exhaustion.

Zhao Chiying looked to Lu Feng. “Elder Lu, I know you and Ruan Hailou used to get along very well. But was that all it took for you to be so cruel? To throw away our disciples’ lives, collude with outsiders, and destroy Bixia Sect like it was nothing?”

Lu Feng sneered. “For many years, you disregarded sect affairs and focused only on your secluded cultivation,” he said defiantly. “When have you ever been a competent sect leader? What right do you have to question me?! Yue Kunchi’s a terrible martial artist and a mediocre administrator. Bixia Sect has long been in decline—it’s a second- or third-rate sect now. If we don’t take drastic measures to reform it, then in a few years, the entire sect will disappear from the world! Ruan-shixiong was one of our own, and now he’s the son-in-law to the King of Goguryeo! Why shouldn’t he lead Bixia Sect and restore its former glory?! You really are skilled at shortchanging people. Everyone here has been fighting for hours and many even lost their lives. Then, at the last moment, you swoop in to clean up the mess. Just as I’d expect of the sect leader! The winner becomes king, the loser the villain! What else is there to say?”

Zhao Chiying shook her head and didn’t argue with Lu Feng. She only told Fan Yuanbai and the rest to take him into custody, then turned to

Ruan Hailou. “Ruan Hailou, after your actions today, you owe a blood debt to Bixia Sect, so I will kill you. Do you have anything left to say?”

Ruan Hailou stared unswervingly at Zhao Chiying. “Yue Kunchi told me earlier that Hui Leshan said something about me before he passed.”

“It’s true,” said Zhao Chiying. “Before Shifu passed, he told us everything.”

“What did he say?” Ruan Hailou asked coldly. “Probably something about my boundless greed, about how I was unworthy of his kindness?”

Zhao Chiying shook her head and said slowly, “Shifu said that he was the closest to you out of all his martial siblings back then. At the time, Bixia’s younger generation was full of talented geniuses. Everyone thought the sect would prosper in your generation’s hands. My master and you were the most outstanding of the group, so Shizu[26] couldn’t make up his mind—he didn’t know who to appoint as the next sect leader.

“The contest for the title was exceedingly fierce. Shizu and the elders issued challenge after challenge, but the two of you overcame them all. I heard that one such challenge involved placing the two of you in different locations, then having both of you rush to Chang’an—first to arrive would be the victor. War was widespread then, so the journeys were terribly perilous, fraught with difficulty. My master fell ill in Yi Province, and your path happened to take you through there as well. You held up your trip to take care of him. And so, in the end, neither of you was the first to arrive. It was another disciple entirely.”

As she talked, Ruan Hailou, too, seemed to sink into memories of these old affairs. “Yes, he was always stubborn and never admitted defeat. No matter what it was, he’d fight to the last. During that race, he fell seriously ill—he was completely unable to get out of bed. If it weren’t for that, he’d have never let it hold him up. I just couldn’t leave him alone in the inn like that.”

“My master said that he’d always been competitive, even as a child. He was completely obsessed with winning and losing. You were the one who always yielded to him. He never had the chance to thank you properly.”

Ruan Hailong spat a derisive laugh. “I don’t need his gratitude! He was great at pretending to be the good guy in front of you. I’m sure he’s made all sort of embellishments to his accomplishments!”

Zhao Chying ignored the bitterness in his voice and continued. “The challenges and the contest for sect leader became increasingly intense. With only victory on his mind, my master cast aside his old friendship and took some dishonorable measures…”

Yue Kunchi burst out, “Shimei!”

“This is what Shizun told us before he passed,” said Zhao Chiying calmly. “You heard everything then too. I’m only truthfully conveying his words.”

“But…”

“One must absolutely respect his seniors”—this concept was deeply ingrained in him. He simply couldn’t bring himself to speak ill of his departed shifu, no matter what.

Zhao Chiying continued, “The innocent will remain innocent, and sinners will remain sinners. The truth is there forever—it won’t disappear with the passage of time. The wrongs Shifu committed back then indirectly led to our current state of affairs. As his disciples, we must bear the consequences. This, too, was Shizun’s wish before he passed away.”

Off to one side, Fan Yuanbai’s group was dumbfounded.

These old affairs, concealed and little known, had finally come to a conclusion that chaotic night. Zhao Chiying and Yue Kunchi had only been young disciples then, unable to grasp what was really going on. There was even less to be said about the likes of Fan Yuanbai, who hadn’t even joined the sect yet.

Zhao Chiying said to Ruan Hailou, “Shifu once told you that you were more capable than he was. That you should be the one to take up the position of sect leader. He said that he wouldn’t participate in the contest anymore, and you believed him. So the two of you drank yourselves into a haze, and when you woke, Shizu’s youngest daughter was lying beside you. Shizu thought you’d lost your morals in your drunkenness, and he deemed you unfit for any important role. With no way to exonerate yourself, you asked Shifu to testify on your behalf. But instead, he accused you. Before

he died, Shifu said that he'd purposely gotten you drunk that night. He also knew Shizu's daughter held a torch for you, so he colluded with her and staged that scene, deceiving Shizu and everyone else. But you were fiery and forthright—in your wrath, you clashed with Shizu, then left the sect in a rage…"

Ruan Hailou gave a bitter, pained smile. "Yes, I'll never forget what happened. How the one I trusted most plotted against me in secret—how he did such things to me!"

"Because of this incident, the sect gradually fell apart. Not long after you left, Zhu-shixiong left as well. The sect that had been fading like the setting sun waned even further. Shizu left the position of sect leader to Shifu, but Shifu's heart could never rest. Right before the end, he told us the truth. He said to us that if you ever came back, we must tell you that he owes you half a lifetime of wrongs."

Ruan Hailou's face was now deathly pale, and a strange smile bloomed on his face. "Owes me? If he owes me, why doesn't he come out himself? Why make you say it?!" His expression turned savage. "Is he still alive after all?! He's been hiding in the dark watching us this entire time, hasn't he?! Call him out! Call Hui Leshan out!"

There was a faint, almost indiscernible trace of pity in Zhao Chiying's eyes. "Shifu spent half his life wallowing in guilt because of what happened. He passed early, unable to cure the sickness in his heart."

Ruan Hailou shook his head. "Impossible! How could someone as cunning and sly as him die so young!"

Zhao Chiying sighed. "I fear that even Shifu never imagined that what he owed you would be repaid with the blood of so many Bixia Sect disciples. Each debt should be counted separately. As for this current debt between us, I'll settle it."

But it was like Ruan Hailou couldn't hear her. "I refuse to believe that he's dead. Where is his grave?"

Yue Kunchi couldn't take it any longer. "When Bixia Sect leaders die, their bodies are cremated and their ashes scattered among the many peaks of Mount Tai. Only their memorial tablet is enshrined in the House of Founders. Have you spent so long as a foreigner that you forgot this too?"

Ruan Hailou slowly closed his eyes. After a long while, two streams of tears flowed down his cheeks, and he spoke no more.

Zhao Chiying said to Fan Yuanbai and the rest, “Dress your wounds, then search around to see if there are any other disciples still alive. When that’s done, shut these people up in separate cells. We’ll deal with them some other day.”

“Yes!” The disciples quickly replied.

Pu Anmi blurted out, “My master Kunye will be here soon to visit Sect Leader Zhao. I ask for the Sect Leader to release me. We can talk this over.”

Zhao Chiying was perplexed. “Who is Kunye?”

She’d been in seclusion for a long time—she’d never even heard of Kunye.

“My master is the Göktürk Khaganate’s Wise King of the Left, and the disciple of the Khaganate’s Grand Master, Hulugu. He’s defeated Xuandu Mountain’s sect leader.” He paused to look at Shen Qiao. “Ah yes, it was precisely this Sect Leader Shen—Daoist Master Shen.”

Zhao Chiying furrowed her brows. “What exactly is going on here?”

Yue Kunchi endured the pain of his injuries and briefly explained the ins and outs of the tale. Then he said to Zhao Chiying, “We owe much to Daoist Master Shen—without him, we would have already lost control of the situation before you arrived.”

Zhao Chiying nodded, then cupped her hands at Shen Qiao in thanks. “Thank you very much for your help, Daoist Master Shen. Bixia Sect will engrave your great kindness onto our hearts.”

“Sect Leader Zhao is too courteous,” said Shen Qiao.

“There are many matters I must take care of. If Daoist Master Shen has nothing urgent, would you mind resting here in our sect for now? I’ll return to consult you once I’m finished with other affairs.”

The incident had been a great blow to Bixia Sect. Of their notable disciples, only Fan Yuanbai and Zhou Yexue remained and both of them were injured. And then there were the rest, who lay scattered on the ground. It was a truly mournful sight.

The corpses of those disciples had to be cleared away, one by one. It was no easy task.

Shen Qiao expressed his understanding. “Then I’ll impose on you for a couple of days. Once Sect Leader Zhao takes care of more important matters, we can talk.”

Pu Anmi was rather dissatisfied with being ignored. He was about to say something when Zhao Chiying’s sheath struck out and hit his acupoint, successfully shutting him up.

What followed next wasn’t something Shen Qiao could intervene in. He took Shiwu to the guest room. No one was available to serve them, and they couldn’t ask a great and mighty sect leader like Zhao Chiying to bring them tea and water. So the disciple stepped up to the task. Little Shiwu diligently ran in and out the room. Very quickly, he’d boiled Shen Qiao some hot water and returned with a plateful of desserts from the kitchen.

Stuck between laughing and crying, Shen Qiao pulled Shiwu down to sit next to him. “I’m not hungry. You can eat them all.”

Shiwu refused to sit. “I’m not hungry either. Shen-shi must be exhausted after all that fighting. I’ll massage your shoulders!”

Shen Qiao stopped his hand. “Shiwu, are you frightened?”

Shiwu started, then stammered, “No—not at all!”

Shen Qiao stroked the boy’s head. “I might have poor eyesight, but my heart hasn’t gone blind. What are you afraid of? Are you afraid that I’ll abandon you?”

The rims of Shiwu’s eyes abruptly went red. He lowered his head—for a long while, he didn’t speak. At last, he said, “I shouldn’t be like this. Shifu wanted me to come to Bixia Sect, and I’m finally here. I should be happy, but the moment I remember that you’re leaving soon, I just feel terribly sad.”

Shen Qiao smiled and sighed. “Silly boy!”

He was about to say something else when the sound of commotion came from outside.

There was no time for careful consideration—Shen Qiao and Shiwu left the room and went to look.

They followed the noise to the back mountain area. It wasn't far from the rear courtyard they were in, and next to it was Bixia Sect's library and House of Founders.

Zhao Chiying's voice drifted to them in a harsh shout. "Ruan Hailou! What are you doing?!"

She was a woman of incredible composure, the sort who wouldn't flinch if a mountain collapsed right in front of her. The way she'd dealt with everything had left a deep impression on Shen Qiao. But now, something had happened, and it had compromised her level-mindedness. Even her voice cracked.

When Shen Qiao and Shiwu arrived, they saw Ruan Hailou standing at the edge of a cliff, his back to them. He was holding a wooden plaque in his arms.

The mountain wind wailed, buffeting them until they could scarcely open their eyes. Their robes danced and flapped noisily.

Yue Kunchi's face was pale and green from fury. He looked like he was about to hack up blood. "You Ruan bastard! Put down Shizun's plaque right now!"

Ruan Hailou didn't even glance back. He only lowered his head, speaking to the object in his arms. "Hui Leshan, you owed me half a life, yet you fled to an early death. What a skillful calculation!

"I killed countless of your sect's disciples—you must hate me bitterly for that. But it's fine, because I'll repay you with my life. But how are you going to repay the half a life you owe me?!"

He burst into loud laughter, his face tilted toward the sky. His laughter was laced with endless misery.

"Hui Leshan, how cruel you are! How awfully I hate you!"

The moment he'd spoken, he leapt from the cliff.

"Ah!"

Someone watching couldn't stop themselves from crying out; everyone stood staring, utterly astonished and speechless.

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Chapter 50:
Aftermath

WHEN RUAN HAILOU had forced open his acupoints and sprinted toward the House of Founders, everyone thought that the hatred that had built up inside him for more than a decade had finally reached its peak, and that he wanted to take it out on Hui Leshan's tablet. Never could they have imagined a conclusion such as this.

Ruan Hailou's figure had already vanished from the cliff's edge, but it took a long time for all present to return to their senses. They didn't know whether to sigh or gnash their teeth, but when they thought of the terrible fate of the Bixia Sect disciples, they could only heave a deep sigh.

A long moment later, Yue Kunchi rasped, "Shimei, Shizun's tablet fell down with him. Should we erect a new one for Shizun in the House of Founders?"

Zhao Chiying was quiet for a while, then said, "Let's leave it for now. We can talk about it later."

Then she turned to look at Shen Qiao and Shiwu. "Does Daoist Master Shen have some time? I wish to consult you about something."

"Please go ahead, Sect Leader Zhao."

Zhao Chiying saw Shiwu following them, his face tinged with nervousness, and smiled despite herself. "Shiwu should come along too."

Shiwu was a little embarrassed. Shy by nature, he first hid his face behind Shen Qiao, then seemed to realize this was a bit rude. He quickly poked himself out again and said, "Thank you, Sect Leader Zhao."

Even Yue Kunchi thought Shiwu rather cute, and a snort of laughter escaped him. But he'd forgotten about his internal injuries—right after laughing, he hissed harshly in pain.

"I told you to rest, but you didn't listen," said Zhao Chiying. "In that case, you can come too." Zhao Chiying shook her head, clearly near the end

of her rope with this shixiong. She gestured ahead with her left hand. “This way, Daoist Master Shen.”

She led the three of them to Bixia Sect’s Zhengyang Pavilion. This was where the sect leader would normally entertain honored guests. It had been a long time since the last guest—few came after Bixia Sect’s decline. Entering it, they could smell the faint scent of cold desolation.

Shen Qiao and Shiwu had just taken their seats when they saw Zhao Chiying kneel before them with a solemn expression, then bow with her head to the ground in Shen Qiao’s direction.

“Why are you bowing so deeply?” Shen Qiao was shocked. He stood and moved to pull her up, but Zhao Chiying stopped him.

“Shixiong and Yuanbai have already told me. You brought Shiwu all the way from Yecheng to Bixia Sect, just to fulfill what Zhu-shixiong entrusted you with before his passing. A promise is worth a thousand gold, and you are a man of your word. You deserve this bow of respect from me.”

Shen Qiao smiled, anguished. “Your honored sect was in the middle of a crisis, so I couldn’t explain in full. Sect Leader Zhao and Elder Yue probably don’t know, but Zhu-xiong died because of me.”

He told them how he’d been severely wounded in a fight with Sang Jingxing, and how, after his close shave with death, he’d hidden himself in the mountains. How Shiwu had saved him, and how the abbot and his disciples had taken him in, bringing that fatal calamity to their door.

For Shiwu, recalling it all again was utterly agonizing—it meant scene after scene of blood and tears. But Shen Qiao had taught him courage, and he was no longer the child who’d burst into tears at the drop of a hat. Now he forced his sorrow down, clenched his hands into fists, and spoke not a single word.

Once Shen Qiao was finished, a heavy silence settled over Zhuyang Pavilion.

After a moment, Zhao Chiying said sternly, “These are two separate matters. No one could have predicted Zhu-shishu’s death, and it’s the last thing you wanted to happen. He walked proudly to this death, so I trust he was perfectly willing. No one could have stopped him, and he achieved what he wanted to. How can Daoist Master Shen say it was because of you?

Hehuan Sect knew Zhu-shixiong was from Bixia Sect, and they still murdered him ruthlessly. This debt is on their head, not yours."

The more reasonable she was, the guiltier Shen Qiao became.

He was happy to treat others with kindness, and he didn't care how much he gained or lost in exchange. But when other people returned him a similar kindness, to the point that they were willing to die for him, it was far harder for him than simply receiving nothing in the first place.

As if sensing Shen Qiao's thoughts, Shiwu reached out to hold his hand.

A small patch of warmth lay snug in his palm. Shen Qiao squeezed Shiwu's hand back, enveloping that warmth within his own hand.

"I'm very grateful for Sect Leader Zhao's consideration. But I did cause this, so I should be the one to resolve it. It is no concern of Bixia Sect's."

Witnessing their deep affection for each other, as if they couldn't stand to part, Zhao Chiying began to think to herself. At the same time, she asked, "Was Zhu-shishu's last request for Shiwu to join Bixia Sect?"

"Yes," said Shen Qiao. "Though Zhu-xiong left the sect for his own reasons and never returned, he's always considered himself a member of Bixia Sect in his heart."

Zhao Chiying took the wooden plaque Shiwu handed over and brushed over the "Zhu" character atop it. For a moment, a trace of sorrow flitted across her expression, which was normally so calm and composed.

"Once, Bixia Sect had members who ranked in the top ten too," she said. "But with our internal feuds, our talent waned, declining day after day. What happened today was like piling frost atop snow—disaster on top of disaster. Fan Yuanbai took a count just now: only six of our disciples survived."

With Zhao Chiying and Yue Kunchi, this only brought their numbers up to eight. What could an eight-man sect even do? If they didn't produce any reasonably talented disciples, then even if nobody attacked them again, their sect would be gone within the next decade, living on only in name.

Yue Kunchi's heart ached at her words. He tried, rather unconvincingly, to add another person to their numbers. "I have another disciple in Yecheng…"

A memory stirred in Shen Qiao. "Does Yue-xiong mean Han Eying?"

"Correct," said Yue Kunchi. "Her father is the Palace Attendant of Qi, Han Feng. She's decently talented, but due to her special status, I didn't take her as my personal disciple—I treated her like an external disciple and taught her a little that way. Has Daoist Master Shen met her?"

"I had the pleasure of meeting her once," said Shen Qiao.

He'd only been able to meet Han Eying because Yan Wushi had saved him. And the only reason he was here now was because Yan Wushi had handed him to Sang Jingxing.

All of these causes and effects seemed obscurely interconnected. In the end, perhaps it was impossible to separate any of it from that one particular name.

Shen Qiao suddenly remembered what Pu Anmi had said: that soon, Yan Wushi wouldn't be able to save even himself. And Bai Rong had once said something similar.

Of course someone as capricious and unbridled as Yan Wushi had countless enemies. But if you asked Shen Qiao who in this world was truly capable of killing him, he wouldn't be able to think of one. There might be a flaw somewhere in Yan Wushi's martial arts and his demonic core, but he'd already far surpassed the jianghu's ordinary first-rate experts. It was clear from his duel with Ruyan Kehui. If not for the instability in Yan Wushi's demonic core, Ruyan Kehui probably wouldn't have walked away with only a few months' worth of healing to do.

Qi Fengge was gone, and so was Cui Youwang. There was no one who could match Yan Wushi. As strong as he was, even a resurrected Qi Fengge and Cui Youwang might not be able to defeat him.

But it was clear Pu Anmi already knew of some well-crafted plot. Bai Rong, too, couldn't have just been speaking nonsense…

Shen Qiao frowned and pushed these details to the back of his mind for the moment.

Now, whenever he recalled Yan Wushi's name, he felt a strange sensation. It was as if he were back in the forest at the foot of Bailong Mountain. That intense state of mind where he'd blazed with the desire to destroy everything, to perish together with Sang Jingxing, seemed to haunt him, ever present.

To dismantle everything and rise anew—it sounded so simple, but it'd cost him almost half a lifetime of hardship, and he'd had to cross the chasm between life and death itself. He'd been more ghost than man, and from there he'd scaled that thousand-meter cliff face, crawling to the precipice little by little.

Now it was all clear blue skies, but back then, the anguish had practically ripped him apart. It'd been a fate worse than death.

"Shen-shi?" Shiwu's worried voice floated to him.

Shen Qiao offered the boy a comforting smile, showing him that there was nothing wrong. Then he said to Zhao Chiying, "Shiwu is at Bixia Sect now, safe and sound. What plans does Sect Leader Zhao have for him? If this humble Daoist can be of any help, please don't hold back—let me know."

"I indeed have a favor to ask of you," said Zhao Chiying. "It's about Shiwu."

She met Shen Qiao's perplexed eyes and said, "Shiwu already has a shifu in Bixia Sect—his shifu is Zhu-shishu. This fact will never change. No one else, including me, has any right to be Shiwu's shifu. But I know that Daoist Master Shen must have taught Shiwu much during your journey. If Shiwu still needs someone to guide him as he grows up, to teach him martial arts, then I want that person to be you."

Shen Qiao was somewhat taken back. "I fear that would go against Zhu-xiong's wishes…"

Zhao Chiying shook her head. "Zhu-shishu wanted Shiwu to return to his sect because he was afraid that Shiwu would have no one to rely on in the future. But with Daoist Master Shen here, Zhu-shishu has no need to worry. Zhu-shishu is gone from this world, but Bixia Sect's gates will always be open to Shiwu, and we won't stop him from taking another master. I can see that Shiwu is clever and talented. At the moment, Bixia

Sect is very weak, and we must start over again from nothing. What's more, I'm not very good at guiding disciples—I fear that I'll only waste Shiwu's excellent aptitude. Letting him follow Daoist Master Shen really is the best choice."

Then she turned to Shiwu. "Shiwu, you haven't officially acknowledged Daoist Master Shen as your shifu, have you? While we're here as witnesses today, why not take the chance to offer your shifu a cup of tea?"

Joy bloomed on Shiwu's face. He had to look at Shen Qiao. "Can I, Shen-shi?"

Shen Qiao couldn't bear to disappoint the boy, so he smiled and nodded. "Of course."

Shiwu inadvertently let out a low cheer and immediately fell to his knees before Shen Qiao. Earnestly, he kowtowed to Shen Qiao three times, then accepted the teacup Zhao Chiying passed him. He held it above his head in both hands and said brightly, "Praise be to Shizun! From this day forth, the disciple Shiwu promises to serve his master, study martial arts, and conduct himself with the utmost sincerity! If I ever violate this oath, may the Five Thunders fall upon my head and heaven and earth punish me!"

Shen Qiao watched him, his eyes curved into smiling crescent moons. When Shiwu finished, he took the teacup from him and drank its contents in one go. Then he pulled the boy up and patted the dust from his clothes.

A chuckle escaped Zhao Chiying. "Zhu-shishu found a truly wonderful shifu for Shiwu! Daoist Master Shen doesn't treat Shiwu like a disciple but like his own beloved son!"

Shiwu's small face flushed red with undisguised joy.

With Shen Qiao and Shiwu's status as master and disciple officially confirmed, Yue Kunchi turned to more important matters. "Just now, Pu Anmi said that his shifu Kunye will soon arrive, probably to lend him support. When he gets here and discovers that Ruan Hailou is dead and Pu Anmi imprisoned, I fear he'll use it as a justification to quarrel. I've heard that Daoist Master Shen has had dealings with Kunye before—what kind of person is he? Can we handle him?"

Shen Qiao took a moment to think before answering. “Martially, he’s not quite as strong as his shixiong Duan Wenyang, and he lacks his shixiong’s breadth and depth of mind. However, he’s still skilled enough to count as a first-rate martial expert. There might be quite the battle.”

Worry clouded Yue Kunchi’s face. “If he ascends the mountain by himself, that’s one thing. But if he brings the Göktürks’ martial experts with him… Bixia Sect only has a few people left. Even with her strength, Shimei won’t be able to hold off all the enemies alone!”

“It’ll be fine,” said Zhao Chiying. “At this point, Bixia Sect has nothing to lose. Though we’re cornered, we must fight. Otherwise, all that awaits us is for our names to be stricken from the jianghu. But Yuanbai and Yexue are still young—Yue-shixiong, please take them down the mountain for now, so they can hide and recuperate. Daoist Master Shen should take Shiwu away as well. I was in seclusion for too long, and all responsibilities fell to Shixiong. It was a lot of trouble for you. Now, I shall undertake everything myself.”

Yue Kunchi’s eyes were red. “What are you saying? I’m not leaving!”

A trace of impatience surfaced on Zhao Chiying’s face. “You have serious injuries, and even if you do stay, it won’t help the situation. You’ll only add to my burden and distract me. It’s better for you to leave the mountain with Daoist Master Shen and the rest instead of wandering around in front of me being a nagging eyesore!”

Yue Kunchi laughed. “I know you’re saying this to keep me out of danger. But Bixia Sect already has nothing else to lose, so whether we advance or retreat, we’ll do it as one. It was my fault the mountain gates were breached today. I absolutely won’t withdraw beforehand.”

Shen Qiao spoke up as well. “Sect Leader Zhao, Shiwu and I will remain here as well.”

Zhao Chiying frowned. “But you…”

“In the past, I dueled Kunye and fell from a cliff in defeat. Even though there’s another story behind that, one which others need not know, a loss is a loss. If there is another chance to fight Kunye now, I will undertake it with everything I have. Please give me this chance, Sect Leader Zhao.”

“And what if I refuse?” asked Zhao Chiying.

Shen Qiao smiled cheerfully. “Then this humble Daoist can only shamelessly loiter here until Kunye shows up.”

Zhao Chiying stared at him for a long while, then let out a sudden sigh. “What have Bixia Sect and I done to be worthy of making a friend like you?”

“There are some who never understand each other in their lifetime, and there are some who become old friends with a single meeting. Zhu-xiong gave up his life for me, a stranger he’d met only once. Of course I’ll fight for Bixia Sect as well. And there is indeed some history between me and Kunye—it’s not all for Bixia Sect’s sake.”

Zhao Chiying had met Shen Qiao only a scant few times; they barely knew each other. But because they’d weathered the crisis at Bixia Sect together, she’d gained an excellent impression of him. And now she saw how bravely he volunteered himself for a sect he had no ties to, and she was overcome with gratitude. “I have no words to express how grateful I am for your immense kindness,” she said. “I shall treasure Daoist Master Shen’s friendship and your trouble deep within my heart. I cannot claim that I’ll be able to repay it in abundance, but if you ever have need of anything at all, Bixia Sect will go through fire and water for you, no matter what.”

They discussed the matter of Kunye for a while. Once they’d more or less made their decisions, Shen Qiao noticed the fatigue on Shiwu’s face. He got up and took his leave while the other remained, and brought Shiwu back to the guest room.

On the way there, Shiwu asked Shen Qiao, “Shizun, just now Sect Leader Zhao talked about keeping your trouble deep within her heart. What trouble was she speaking of? I didn’t really understand.”

“Bixia Sect has been in steady decline,” said Shen Qiao. “Sect Leader Zhao didn’t say as much, but she must feel terribly anxious. She knows that the strong rule in the jianghu, so she leaps to improve her martial arts, hoping for great achievements. That way, she can protect her sect from outside powers. Unfortunately, Lu Feng betrayed them. He colluded with outsiders to launch an assault just as she was at a critical juncture in her cultivation. Sect Leader Zhao was forced to break her meditation. Though she isn’t showing it, she’s actually suffering internal injuries right now. If she duels Kunye, she has no chance of victory. She knows that I proposed

to duel him myself to help her out of this predicament. That's why she said she's grateful—for the trouble I went to."

Shiwu quietly gasped and felt himself grow nervous. "Then what about Shizun? Can you defeat Kunye? I heard that your esteemed self already lost to him once before. Is he very strong?"

The boy's worry had sent him into a panic, and he spoke thoughtlessly. Anyone else might have first considered whether their words would hurt Shen Qiao's pride.

Smiling, Shen Qiao answered, "He isn't the strongest, but he certainly has his strengths that he excels at. My martial arts haven't fully recovered yet—I cannot say that victory is certain."

"What are your chances of winning?"

Shen Qiao tried to smooth out Shiwu's tightly pinched brows. "About fifty-fifty."

Not only did Shiwu's brows fail to smooth out, they pinched together even harder. Shen Qiao's words had obviously scared him.

Kunye wasn't as strong a martial artist as Duan Wenyang, but he wasn't much weaker. Working with Yu Ai to poison Shen Qiao cast dishonor over his victory, but his actual skills weren't lacking. If Zhao Chiying faced him uninjured, the fight might end in a tie. But now it was hard to say. If Shen Qiao weren't here, perhaps Bixia Sect really would be forced into either protecting the sect to their deaths or preemptively retreating. But if that happened and they retreated, Zhunan Peak would be occupied by outsiders, and Bixia Sect's generations of legacy would be destroyed right then and there.

And so what Shen Qiao promised was more than a duel or a favor—it was something that might very well preserve Bixia Sect's crumbling, battered foundations.

Shiwu threw his arms around Shen Qiao and buried his head in Shen Qiao's chest. "Do you have to fight?" he mumbled. "Your martial arts haven't even fully returned!"

Shen Qiao hugged him back. "Fifty-fifty doesn't mean I don't stand a chance. If I give the fight everything I have, I can win. When I lost to

Kunye, I fell to the lowest point in my life. Regardless of how many reasons or excuses I claim, he's a stumbling block in my path, a personal demon I must face. I stumbled and fell, so now I must learn to stand anew. Do you understand?"

Shiwu continued to cling to him, saying nothing. It was a long time before he whispered, "I understand… I just don't want anything to happen to you…"

"Nothing will happen to me." Shen Qiao laughed. "I am your shifu, so I have to live to be a hundred years old! I promised to live out Zhu-xiong's share of life as well as my own. When you're a white-bearded old man, this master will still be dragging you around by the ear and lecturing you all day long! Let's see if you find it irritating then!"

A laugh sputtered from Shiwu; he couldn't help breaking into a smile.

Shen Qiao sighed and stroked the boy's head. "Other masters have their disciples racking their brains for every possible way to show their master respect, and yet my disciple has me racking *mine* for every possible way to make him happy! I took on such a respected role, yet get no dignity at all!"

Shiwu was beaming and didn't offer a retort. *You might be the least dignified master,* he thought to himself, *but you are the world's best master.*

Just the thought that he was Shen Qiao's disciple was enough to fill him with satisfaction.

For two days, the foot of the mountain remained quiet, and no outsiders arrived. This gave Bixia Sect the time to rest and reorganize themselves. Shiwu helped Fan Yuanbai and the others lay to rest the Bixia Sect disciples who'd died in battle, one by one. After all the blood and slaughter, all that was left of this once-lively sect was an empty void.

By great fortune, Fan Yuanbai and Zhou Yexue had survived, but there was no joy to be found on their faces. They both grieved for the fellow disciples who'd been lost and were anxious about the fierce battle that might soon arrive. Naturally, they weren't in high spirits.

On the third day, the bell outside Zhengyang Pavilion rang, and soon its peals reached everywhere in Bixia Sect. It was a message from the

disciples keeping watch over the mid-mountain region: someone was coming up the mountain, and they couldn't stop him.

Understanding the message, everyone rushed to the mountain gates. There they saw a young man standing with his hands clasped behind his back, dressed in foreign garb. Two other people followed him, their brows heavy and noses prominent. Their long hair fell to their shoulders which was pulled into braids, and scarves were wound about their heads. This distinct manner of dress gave their identities away at a glance.

"We didn't know that we'd have honored guests coming," Zhao Chiying said sternly. "Please forgive us for not coming out to receive you. I am Bixia Sect Leader Zhao Chiying. May I ask this distinguished master's esteemed name?"

"Kunye of the Göktürks. I'm here to pick up my unworthy disciple," the man said proudly. Then he studied her with a measuring gaze and shook his head. "*You* are Bixia Sect Leader Zhao Chiying? Rumors called you an extraordinary talent, the one who revived your sect. But now I see there's not much to you."

Fan Yuanbai and others were standing behind her. They glared at him angrily for saying such a thing, but privately, Zhao Chiying was stunned.

She suddenly recalled Shen Qiao's appraisal of Kunye: that he was highly respected in the Khaganate as well as Hulugu's disciple. Hence, he was incredibly arrogant, but his martial arts were the real deal, and authoritatively so. He wasn't strong enough for the top ten, but he wasn't far from them. Regardless of whether he'd tampered with the duel on Banbu Peak, he wasn't someone who could be trifled with.

For Kunye to say something like that the moment they met, it was obvious he wasn't simply belittling Zhao Chiying or trying to provoke her. Rather, he could tell that she was suffering from internal injuries and was no match for him.

His eyes were indeed razor-sharp, just as Shen Qiao had described.

Zhao Chiying's heart sank a little, but she didn't let it show on her face. "So, the Göktürks' Wise King of the Left has honored us with his presence. Together, your disciple and Dongzhou Sect's Ruan Hailou colluded with Lu Feng, a traitor from our sect, and they slaughtered

countless Bixia Sect disciples. Can the Wise King of the Left offer any explanation for this?”

Kunye let out a derisive laugh. “Pu Anmi was invited here by the elders of your honored sect. He arrived at the mountain as a guest. Yet what awaited him was not fine wines and exquisite delicacies but the weapons of your honored sect’s disciples. As his shifu, I don’t even know whether he’s dead or alive. Can Sect Leader Zhao offer any explanation for *that*?”

Now this was pure sophistry. If Kunye and his disciple hadn’t agreed ahead of time that he’d play the fisherman reeling in the net—that he’d come to Bixia Sect and profit off the conflict—then how could he know that Pu Anmi was imprisoned there?

Rage surfaced on the faces of the remaining members of Bixia Sect.

Zhao Chiying hadn’t killed Pu Anmi after imprisoning him, but she couldn’t simply release him either. If word got out that Bixia Sect had yielded to the Göktürks, they’d have little standing left in the jianghu. What was more, Pu Anmi still needed to repay the blood debt he’d incurred by taking the lives of countless disciples.

“You and I both know very well what your disciple has done,” Zhao Chiying said coolly. “It’s pointless for the Wise King of the Left to put up such a pretense. As long as a single member of Bixia Sect is still standing, we will not permit you to take Pu Anmi away.”

Kunye laughed uproariously, like he’d heard some enormous joke. “Zhao Chiying, from what I see, there aren’t even ten disciples standing behind you. Bixia Sect has been a sect in name only for some time now. Where do you get the confidence to speak so boldly? If I kill you today, Bixia Sect will completely cease to exist!”

“You can kill people, but you cannot kill their hearts.”

It was an awfully familiar voice. Kunye’s brows twitched involuntarily, and he twisted around to look. A man carrying a sword walked toward him.

A face that couldn’t have been more familiar—one that Kunye saw even in his dreams.

Because once, he’d fought this man on Banbu Peak.

And that duel had caught the eye of the entire world, and with that, Kunye had soared to fame all across the Central Plains.

And with that, the man before him had been utterly disgraced and lost all his martial arts. Though he'd been fortunate enough to survive, all that had remained to him for the rest of his life was to waste away, gasping feebly for breath.

"Shen. Qiao." Kunye forced this name out between gritted teeth. His voice was layered with emotions so complex even Kunye himself couldn't have described them.

"I trust that you've been well, Kunye."

Shen Qiao nodded toward him, the same as he'd done that day on Banbu Peak. But Shen Qiao had been a grandmaster then, helming a sect, someone the entire world admired. And Kunye had just entered the Central Plains and hadn't yet made his name.

But time had passed and things had changed. Their positions had changed tremendously. Kunye was no longer that Kunye, and Shen Qiao was no longer that Xuandu Mountain Sect Leader.

But how was he still so calm?

From the moment they came face-to-face, Kunye closely scrutinized Shen Qiao, but he couldn't find even a flicker of misery or dejection.

Shen Qiao was still the same Shen Qiao. He didn't seem to have changed at all.

No!

He must have, somewhere.

"Sect Leader Shen," Kunye said suddenly. "Ah no, I can't call you Sect Leader anymore. Daoist Master Shen, were you injured in your fall from the cliff? There seems to be something a little strange about your eyes."

"Yes," said Shen Qiao. "Although my eyes have nothing to do with the fall. Joyful Reunion caused that. As for why and how, surely you know better than I do?"

Kunye shook his head. “You should blame your shidi, Yu Ai. He was the one who poisoned you, not me. I challenged you to a duel, sent you a letter sincerely and honestly, then fought you openly and honestly on Banbu Peak. Everyone saw it; I never made any dishonest moves.”

He looked at the sword in Shen Qiao’s hand and chuckled. “Did you wait for me here because you were dissatisfied with your defeat? Or are you just standing up for Bixia Sect even though it has nothing to do with you?”

“The affairs of the past are like the waters flowing by: they cannot be returned. I’ve waited for you here for one purpose: to ask you for a duel. Dare you accept my challenge?”

Slowly, he drew his sword from its sheath and let it hang, its point toward the ground and lightly quivering. Shimmering sunlight glinted, dazzling, off the metal.

The mocking look on Kunye’s face faded, and his expression became incomparably stern.

He, too, drew the saber from his back.

This battle was destined to happen. It had only been a matter of when.

Kunye felt a thrill running through his bones. Though he’d defeated Shen Qiao before, deep inside his heart, Joyful Reunion rankled at him too. Misgivings about how his victory was achieved remained.

This time, he’d make Shen Qiao wholeheartedly accept defeat!

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Chapter 51:
Limits

NO ONE IN BIXIA SECT expected the battle to be so intense.

Kunye was a martial expert of his generation, after all, and he was also Hulugu's disciple. His master had nearly fought Qi Fengge to a standstill. Such an opponent wasn't so easily bested.

Shen Qiao had already lost once, and it left a shadow in his mind. Winning the second round was even harder than winning the first—not only must he overcome his opponent, he also had to overcome himself.

Though the Bixia Sect disciples were worried, they took heart from seeing their sect leader standing next to them. They felt like, even if Shen Qiao lost, their sect leader could still fight. Only Yue Kunchi understood that Zhao Chiying's forceful exit from her meditation had damaged her cultivation. If Shen Qiao lost this match, all fate held for Bixia Sect was to be carved up by the enemy.

But could Shen Qiao win?

He swallowed down his restlessness and refocused his mind entirely on the battle.

The martial path Kunye followed was the brash and unconstrained kind, forceful and domineering. There was incredible vigor and authority behind his every slash, each powerful enough to shake the mountains and earth. Whenever his blade qi struck the ground, the spectators felt it quake beneath their feet. As the saber whistled through the air, the sound shrilly droned in their ears. Those with poorer martial foundations were covering their ears already, unable to bear it.

But if someone thought this meant Kunye's qinggong must be lacking, they'd be dreadfully wrong.

They fought from the flat ground all the way to the cliff's edge, then they went on clashing fiercely even while they hung from the cliff wall. Rubble sprayed everywhere as true qi ran unbridled, the sight impossible to follow. Compared to Kunye's domineering attacks, Shen Qiao's moves

almost looked too gentle. His sword took after the man himself—mellow and lingering like the brush of a flower against the cheek or the caress of the spring wind on a willow; unfailingly clear and pure, much like Daoism itself. But its very clarity seemed to lack that forceful, threatening edge.

But after they'd exchanged over a hundred blows and Shen Qiao showed no sign of flagging, everyone who'd been worried about him realized that things weren't as they seemed. If Kunye's saber was an unstoppable, rolling thunderstorm, then Shen Qiao's sword—although it seemed no more than an unremarkable, gurgling trickle crushed beneath the saber qi—was an endless, uninterrupted flow that slowly transformed from calm and peaceful into something of awesome grandeur. It was like the hundred rivers that merged into the sea as it roared and galloped, capable of swallowing all.

The longer Kunye fought, the more shocked he became.

Back on Banbu Peak, he'd only been able to create eight blasts of saber qi. Today, he could summon nine. His mastery of the saber had leapt to even greater heights. He'd arrived here confident that he could match Shen Qiao even as he'd been before his injuries, and that he was certainly a match for today's Shen Qiao, who'd suffered great losses to his martial arts.

He'd thought the man before him was no more than a shallow puddle, its depths discernable in a single glance. But when he reached his hand beneath the surface, he found that no matter what he did, its bottom remained out of reach.

This shallow puddle was in fact a deep pool.

Xuandu Mountain's set of qinggong techniques, "A Rainbow Stretches Across the Heavens," was true to its name. It arced like a rainbow soaring through blue skies, carefree and insubstantial. Shanhe Tongbei cut mark after mark of white sword qi into the steep cliff walls, creating the appearance of calligraphy. But on closer examination, the sword qi had carved deep, vicious gashes in the solid rock face. If such gouges were cut into a person, their bones would show through their rent flesh, and their blood would pour into rivers.

From afar, the weapons flashed and danced, their glinting contours overlapping. Yet the savage saber qi seemed totally unable to gain the upper hand.

Yue Kunchi breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to Zhao Chiying. “Shimei, I feel like Daoist Master Shen should be able to win this time, right?”

Zhao Chiying shook her head. “It won’t be that easy. Did you notice? Kunye can create nine bursts of qi with his saber now. That is equivalent with the highest level of sword intent, and his last burst is the most powerful of all. A slash of his saber gives birth to thousands of massively destructive afterimages. But he’s only done this once—and that was the one attack Daoist Master Shen nearly failed to block.”

Involuntarily, Yue Kunchi gasped, his heart in his throat once again. “Is he trying to exhaust Daoist Master Shen’s true qi?”

“He is,” said Zhao Chiying. “When it comes to true qi, Daoist Master Shen is no match for Kunye now. The longer the fight goes on, the worse it’ll be for him.”

Yue Kunchi began to panic a little. “Then what should we do? Doesn’t Daoist Master Shen realize what’s going on? Is he just going to let Kunye get away with it?”

Zhao Chiying didn’t answer. Naturally, she didn’t believe that Shen Qiao hadn’t seen through this tactic, but she also couldn’t tell what he had planned.

In truth, Shen Qiao was also probing.

He was probing his own limits.

The *Zhuyang Strategy* was capable of rebuilding his foundations, of forging his muscles and bones. And since the *Zhuyang Strategy* combined the strengths of the three schools of thought, the internal cultivation it produced must in turn carry the characteristics of all three schools.

Daoism extolled that the greatest virtue was to be like water—to strive was to not strive. This was in perfect harmony with his original style of swordplay. They came from the same source, so he had no problem executing it.

Buddhism praised solemnity and reverence. There was the terrifying glare of Vajrapani but also the gentle submissiveness of the bodhisattvas. It was something unspeakably profound. The *Zhuyang Strategy* integrated this

concept into its true qi, hard to Daoism's soft, a perfect coupling of strength and gentleness. The two coexisted in harmony, embedding a core of iron into his flexible sword strikes, letting them switch freely between a murmuring stream and a turbulent ocean tide.

Confucianism was a bit more miscellaneous in its contents. When Tao Hongjing had penned the *Zhuyang Strategy*, he'd taken from Confucianism its kindly tolerance and used that to adjust and combine the strengths of all the schools. When a practitioner exhausted their true qi, their Dantian would continuously refine more. It was like a barren tree blooming anew in spring, returning the dead to life.

Before, Shen Qiao had Xuandu Mountain's true qi as his foundation. When he first cultivated the *Zhuyang Strategy*, he'd made surprisingly little progress. Only now, as he recultivated everything from scratch, did he realize what was wondrous about the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Indeed, it deserved to be named the world's most extraordinary book. The many people who fought over it likely didn't even grasp what was truly profound about it.

Even more incredibly, Tao Hongjing must have known when he penned the *Zhuyang Strategy* that it would be impossible to preserve a book during such tumultuous times. He must have foreseen that its contents might not remain intact after he passed away. And so, although the *Zhuyang Strategy* was composed of five volumes, each volume was independent from the rest. Readers wouldn't get a sense of disconnect by reading each individually. If someone could cultivate with all of them, then of course they'd achieve complete perfection. But if they only had one or two, that wouldn't render their martial arts incomplete. At worst, it only lessened the effect.

And so, in this battle, Shen Qiao was also using Kunye to test the result of many days of cultivation. Day-to-day sparring could never bring out the full extent of his abilities. Only by facing a true life-or-death crisis could he plumb the actual depths of his potential, allowing him to ascend to an entirely new echelon.

The martial path was like rowing a boat upstream: if you didn't advance, you'd decline. Otherwise, the likes of Qi Fengge and Hulugu wouldn't have risked their lofty status and decades of martial achievement in favor of progressing along a path that could mean their very death.

At the moment, Shen Qiao's situation was precarious. His sword qi was getting almost completely crushed by Kunye's saber qi, and little true qi remained in his Dantian. Nearly depleted, his attacks were much slower than before, and the power of his sword qi was gradually waning. It seemed he might lose at any moment. Kunye slashed at him, and a terrifying burst of true qi exploded outward. His saber intent transformed into an all-encompassing net that surrounded and enveloped Shen Qiao. Its energy arced in at him, strong enough to incinerate the brush to ashes and transform rivers to vapor—a hundred birds were snuffed out in an instant!

This was the ninth blast of saber qi that Kunye took so much pride in.

Hemmed in on all sides, it seemed there was no way out but to take that ferocious saber qi head-on. Kunye was indeed a worthy disciple of Hulugu. Nearly nobody in all the land could withstand such a slash from him.

With his body suspended in midair, he channeled all his true qi into his blade and then swung it down over Shen Qiao's head, his spirit so magnificent it seemed he might slice the sun and moon into two.

Shiwu's eyes were wide, staring unswervingly across the chasm at the two on the other side. He forgot to breathe.

He wanted Shen Qiao to win more than anyone else, but even he, a pure novice in martial arts, could see how dire the situation was.

Above Shen Qiao were the boundless heavens, beneath him was a bottomless abyss. In all of heaven and earth, the only place he could stand was on was this precipitous cliff, dozens of meters tall. At this moment, he hung by a thread, and there was no time to escape with his qinggong. What in the world could he do to block his opponent's all-out strike?

Zhao Chiying's brows pinched, and she couldn't help but reach over to cover Shiwu's eyes. She didn't want him to see his shifu's blood splatter.

Shiwu had already lost one shifu—one dear person. He wouldn't be able to withstand losing another.

She was overcome with regret. She should have been the one to fight in the first place. If she'd known this would happen, she would never have agreed to Shen Qiao's request. Because he'd been so calm and composed, she'd thought that he had some secret weapon to use against Kunye. She

never expected Shen Qiao to actually fight for his life, to end up in such a perilous spot!

The saber qi was as swift as lightning. In an instant, it had reached tips of his brows. But Shen Qiao's breathing slowed, and he closed his eyes. He didn't choose to flee; he raised his sword to meet it.

To know the world, one must first know themselves. Then they must forget themselves. Once they forgot both the world and themselves, never again would they be moved by worldly gains and losses.

Shanhe Tongbei transformed into a brilliant ray of light: a sword glare. Wrapped within it, Shen Qiao's silhouette disappeared.

The confident smile curving Kunye's lips suddenly froze.

His saber qi couldn't advance even half an inch further.

Shen Qiao's sword speared through Kunye's saber qi and pierced straight at his chest.

No!

Abruptly, Kunye turned, swinging his Liusheng sabre with him horizontally. Sure enough, Shen Qiao appeared behind him, and his white sword intent transformed into two intersecting rays that managed to crush his saber qi entirely.

Impossible!

The refutation flashed through Kunye's mind, but he didn't have time to think anymore. Using his momentum, he leapt dozens of feet into the air, then turned and struck at the rocky wall behind him. The mountain stone immediately gave way, and with a thunderous roar, rubble of all sizes crashed down. With another leap, he landed atop of the cliff.

He swept his gaze downward, but he couldn't find a trace of his opponent among all the falling boulders and debris. But just then an alarm sounded in his mind.

Kunye sent another slash behind him.

But his strike didn't connect with his enemy. Instead, an excruciating pain burst in his back—Shen Qiao had been even faster, and it was clear he'd anticipated Kunye's every move.

This was impossible! Impossible!

He'd thought Shen Qiao had achieved the echelon of sword intent, but this was clearly not sword intent!

To know others was to know oneself—when one understood the minds of others, one would understand their own. Where the sword was, the Dao was. It was a spiritual link, drawing together the immortal's body and the buddha's heart.

Sword heart!

This was unmistakably sword heart!

Shen Qiao had actually managed to attain it!

At this realization, Kunye fled forward like a madman. The prickling pain followed him like his shadow—it never stopped, as if securely tied to him by a string, and he was the puppet on the other end, unable to escape its control.

It was a horrific sensation. Kunye had never been so terrified, not even when Yan Wushi had been chasing him. Yan Wushi hadn't wanted to kill him—he'd only done it to probe Kunye's martial arts. Kunye had understood that, so he'd never used his full strength. But this time was different—he'd tried to kill Shen Qiao. Of course Shen Qiao could kill him too.

There was no luck to be had when both parties gave the fight their all.

Given some time, this Shen Qiao would surely become a terrifying enemy!

But the future was too distant to Kunye. Right now, he needed to escape.

Unable to help himself, he cried, "I've lost! I admit defeat! Don't kill me!"

The prickling pain remained, but its intensity plummeted.

Kunye didn't dare let down his guard. He babbled again. "I have to tell you something! It's to do with Yan Wushi! He scorned and humiliated you! But his death is near at hand! Don't you want to kill him yourself?!"

A sword glare swept past his hair and slammed hard across the trunk of the tree in front of him, splitting it in two in an instant.

Kunye could feel a wave of pain prickle along his ear and cheek—it was definitely from the sword glare. But if he hadn't spoken up, the tree wouldn't have been the only thing split in two.

His strength spent, he stopped, turning to slump against the stone wall behind him. He didn't even bother to wipe the blood from his blade but simply thrust his saber into the ground, panting like mad. He could almost hear his heart thundering away in his chest.

"I've lost! You won!"

He never would have guessed that Shen Qiao could attain the echelon of sword heart. For now, all he could think about was how narrowly he'd escaped death. Lingering fear still gnawed at his heart.

He also knew that the moment he surrendered to Shen Qiao—someone who faithfully adhered to the martial code of honor—his opponent would give up his ruthless pursuit. Such a man would never strike him while he was down.

Qi Fengge or Hulugu would have done the same.

"Have you ever heard of the Coiled Dragon Assembly?"

Shen Qiao didn't reply. It was obvious he was waiting for Kunye to continue.

Kunye gasped down another breath. "The royal capital of Tuyuhun, Fuqi, will hold a grand gathering on the ninth of September. That is the Coiled Dragon Assembly. Every year, merchants from all across the land gather there, and there are always rare treasures revealed and auctioned off to the highest bidder. I heard that one of this year's items belonged to Yan Wushi's late mother."

Shen Qiao frowned slightly.

Sensing Shen Qiao's confusion, Kunye sneered. "My shixiong told me that Yan Wushi's original family name was Xie. Rumor has it he's from Chen Commandery's Xie clan."

The Xie family rose to power during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Back then, they and the Wang family were the most powerful and influential

clans in all the land, and the most famous person among them was Xie An. Still, with time came change, and the Xie clan's glory slowly waned. Today, the Xie clan was in the midst of a gradual decline. But, as the saying went, a starving camel was larger than a horse—they still had a fair amount of renown in the southeastern regions.

And this type of reputation was completely unrelated to the jianghu—it was built atop the scholar class and imperial courts.

But Shen Qiao had made an even deeper connection. "This matter must be top secret. Your people spend most of your time on the grasslands beyond the Great Wall, totally uninvolved in the Central Plains. How did you come by this information, unless…someone else told you?"

"That's right," said Kunye. "Yan Wushi has made a great many enemies, and none of them will be satisfied until he's dead. On the ninth of September, many outstanding talents will gather in Fuqi. Five of the world's most powerful experts will fall upon Yan Wushi and kill him. He might be a peerless martial artist, but he can't save himself this time, not even if he grows wings. Yan Wushi had you dancing in the palm of his hand, so I trust that you'd be happy to head to Fuqi and witness his death with your own eyes, no?"

All of a sudden Shen Qiao said, "I finally understand."

"Understand what?"

"Out of all the nations, Zhou has the best chance of unifying the land. Yuwen Yong allied with Chen to invade Qi, crushing them like a stalk of bamboo. Qi's destruction is imminent. Zhou's next target must be either the Khaganate or Chen Dynasty. Huanyue Sect is supporting Yuwen Yong, so if you want to kill Yuwen Yong, you first must kill Yan Wushi. That's why you collaborated with Linchuan Academy—all for the purpose of killing Yan Wushi. Linchuan Academy is highly influential in Southern Chen, so of course they could look into Yan Wushi's background for you."

At this point, Kunye no longer tried to hide it. "You're mostly right, but it wasn't Linchuan Academy who helped us investigate Yan Wushi's background—it was the Liuhe Guild. As I said, Yan Wushi has made a great many enemies. That night at Chuyun Temple, he ruined things for Dou Yanshan and destroyed the *Zhuyang Strategy* right in front of everyone. So, of course, Dou Yanshan hates him."

“Then what about Linchuan Academy?” asked Shen Qiao. “Ruyan Kehui is completely devoted to restoring the Han people’s rule. If the opportunity to destroy Yan Wushi and break one of Yuwen Yong’s limbs arose, he’d never just stand by and watch. He dueled Yan Wushi in Chen months ago so that he could probe Yan Wushi’s strength. And to prepare for the group assault on the ninth of September.”

“Correct.”

“But Ruyan Kehui was injured in that battle, so he can’t attend the gathering in Fuqi. So who else will be there, other than Dou Yanshan and Duan Wenyang?”

“Your shidi, Yu Ai. Fajing Sect Leader Guang Lingsan. And the former State Preceptor of Zhou, Buddhist Master Xueting.”

Every name he spoke was more frightening than the last.

But, thinking about it carefully, they weren’t unexpected.

Yu Ai had already been collaborating with the Göktürks, so when Duan Wenyang invited him along on this, naturally he’d have been happy to help.

The three demonic sects had always been enemies. Once Yan Wushi was dead, Huanyue Sect would be leaderless. Hehuan Sect was suffering from internal feuds, so Fajing Sect would finally win the chance to lift their heads. Of course Guang Lingshan would involve himself.

And as for Buddhist Master Xueting, he’d once been Yuwen Hu’s state preceptor. But when Yuwen Yong took the throne, he’d repudiated Buddhism and dismissed Xueting. Buddhism’s standing in Zhou took a nosedive. So Buddhist Master Xueting would join in the battle as well—either for the sake of his school or to “eliminate demons.”

The idea of five killing one didn’t sound very honorable for grandmaster-level martial artists, but if it reaped such incredible benefits, who would refuse?

Shen Qiao was silent for a moment. “Why are you certain that Yan Wushi will come? He might have already heard rumors of the plan.”

“My shixiong once said that someone like Yan Wushi will still go, even if he knows it’s a trap. Because he has too much faith in his abilities,

because he’s far too arrogant. He’ll believe that even if he can’t win, he can still walk away. Anything too rigid is more likely to break. Isn’t this a favorite saying among your people of the Central Plains?”

Shen Qiao understood everything now. “Ruyan Kehui dueled Yan Wushi specifically to draw out the flaw in his martial arts. Guang Lingsan is a demonic practitioner, so he must know how to actually kill Yan Wushi. That’s why you’re all so confident that you’ll succeed.”

“That’s right,” said Kunye. “I know you utterly hate Yan Wushi. It’ll be such a grand gathering. Surely you’ll come to watch the fun, even if you don’t participate yourself?”

However, as he was speaking and smiling, he suddenly swung his Liusheng saber, slashing at Shen Qiao!

He knew that Shen Qiao would be shaken by his news, and that when he was shaken, his guard would be at its lowest. He was absolutely certain this attack would succeed.

Shen Qiao would clearly be a fatal poison to both himself and the Khaganate! He couldn’t allow him to live!

Kunye had already decided to risk this when he’d admitted defeat. He poured a lifetime’s worth of power into his swing.

If he didn’t succeed, then he’d die an honorable death.

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Chapter 52:
Group Ambush

SHEN QIAO had attained the echelon of sword heart, but it wasn't yet stable. On top of that, he'd just dueled Kunye—his mind and body were exhausted, and he could scarcely continue. Now, as Kunye slashed down at him from above, he only stood in place, his face stark white, as if his mind had ground to a halt. He stared in a daze, unable to react in time.

Everyone else was too far away to do anything. They'd only seen that Shen Qiao had clearly been about to kill Kunye, only to stop when he'd loudly begged for mercy. Then the two of them spoke about something, and while Shen Qiao was distracted, Kunye abruptly struck, trying to kill him while he was off guard.

Shiwu screamed in alarm. "Shizun! Watch out!"

Kunye's breathing grew ragged and heavy. He could practically hear his own heart pounding. With this strike, he was sure to shatter Shen Qiao's skull and crush his brains, killing him straight away!

He didn't think his actions shameless or unjust because he wasn't only a martial artist—he was the Göktürks' Wise King of the Left. Shen Qiao opposed the collusion between Xuandu Mountain and the Khaganate. If Kunye let him fully realize the sword heart, Shen Qiao would become a huge threat hanging over both the Khaganate and Xuandu Mountain. He had to uproot this threat while it was still just a sprout—he absolutely couldn't give it any chance to develop and grow.

All of this took only an instant.

Saber qi that blotted out both heaven and earth came bearing down. Shen Qiao stayed rooted in place, not moving an inch. Perhaps he couldn't move in time, or perhaps he hadn't returned to his senses. Or perhaps he was stunned by Kunye's overwhelming attack. He didn't even raise the sword in his hand. He only took three steps back.

To everyone else, it looked like a mere three steps, but to Kunye, those three steps were enough to span a chasm. And so he missed.

Finally, Shen Qiao attacked with his sword.

The sword glare blazed, a white ray that seemed to pierce the sun itself. It burst through the massive screen from Kunye's saber and thrust right into Kunye's chest.

When he'd missed, Kunye had frozen as well, unable to move even half a step. His expression seemed to solidify too as he stared at Shen Qiao, unblinking.

"Why…did…" It took all his strength to speak just two words.

The sword glare vanished. Shen Qiao was only inches in front of Kunye. They were so close—if they breathed, they'd collide.

But the point of Shanhe Tongbei's blade had already stabbed into Kunye's chest.

Shen Qiao's face was paper white—he didn't look much better than Kunye. If his sword wasn't skewered into Kunye's body, it would look like he was the one who'd lost.

"Because I was on guard against you the entire time," he said coldly. "How can I trust someone who poisoned their opponent with Joyful Reunion to respect the martial code of honor?"

Shen Qiao then said to him, "You've truly disappointed me. My shizun once said that Hulugu was an opponent worthy of his respect. But you, Hulugu's disciple, don't have even a tenth of his character. You're unworthy of being his disciple!"

Kunye opened his mouth as if trying to retort. But Shen Qiao yanked the sword from his torso, and all that poured from his mouth was fresh blood.

Shen Qiao pushed lightly off the ground, sweeping several meters away to dodge the blood that spewed from the wound his sword left in Kunye's chest.

Kunye didn't move at all, and his breaths gradually petered out. But his eyes were still wide open, and his body refused to fall.

This tragic, moving tableau of one who refused to fall in defeat—it shouldn't happen to someone like him.

Shen Qiao walked over, and with his sword gave him a gentle push.

Kunye fell straight backward, then finally exhaled his last.

Shen Qiao looked at him, his face devoid of joy.

This man was the source of Xuandu Mountain's turmoil; everything had begun with him. Kunye's challenge to battle on Banbu Peak had also raised the curtain on all the misfortunes and setbacks Shen Qiao had suffered.

Now Kunye was dead, but things were far from finished. Xuandu Mountain would never return to the peaceful days of its past. And as for the world itself, the flames and smoke of war would inevitably arise once again.

Shiwu and the rest all cheered when they saw Kunye fall, but their elation was short-lived—they saw Shen Qiao collapse onto one knee, supporting himself with the sword. He coughed up a large mouthful of blood. At the sight of this, they were terrified.

A canyon yawned between the two sides. Shiwu wasn't skilled enough at qinggong to glide across. Just as he was panicking, Zhao Chiying landed next to Shen Qiao. She took his arm, and holding him by waist, she leapt back across with him.

With less distance between them, everyone finally realized that Shen Qiao's face had gone beyond pale. He was only at half his old martial power, and although he'd broken through to the echelon of sword heart at the critical moment, forcibly smashing through his limits with his true qi was too great a burden on his body. Coughing up blood was a natural consequence.

But more serious than the blood was that he couldn't stand on his own. More than half his weight was on Zhao Chiying.

"I apologize for my rudeness…" Shen Qiao said, brows furrowed. His voice was nearly inaudible.

"Daoist Master Shen gave everything you had for Bixia Sect, while I, the sect leader, only looked on from the sidelines. I should be the one apologizing."

She bent down and pulled Shen Qiao onto her back, then set off carrying him back to the sect.

Yue Kunchi watched in silence.

He'd been about to offer to carry Shen Qiao himself, but his shimei took action before he got the chance. The offer remained stuck in his throat—either swallowing it down or saying it out loud felt wrong. In the end, he just stared at Zhao Chiying's back awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

Shiwu trailed after them like a little tail. Even though he couldn't help at all, seeing Shen Qiao was the only thing that could put his mind at ease. But Shen Qiao sank into unconsciousness the moment Zhao Chiying brought him inside, and no amount of calling out could wake him. Zhao Chiying told Shiwu that Shen Qiao had only overtaxed himself and needed time to recover, but Shiwu still stayed by his bedside and refused to leave for even a moment.

Shen Qiao was unconscious for a long time. His dreams were bizarre and varied, flashing past many people and events. When he finally woke up, he sank into a reverie, his expression still somewhat vacant.

"Shizun?" Shiwu worriedly waved a hand in front of Shen Qiao's eyes.

Shen Qiao grabbed his hand with a laugh. "I'm fine."

He'd looked feeble and sickly ever since his foundations had been destroyed, and he'd started practicing with the *Zhuyang Strategy* anew. Combined with his damaged eyes, no one who saw him walking around outside would believe he was a martial artist who'd achieved the echelon of sword heart. Calling him a bedridden, chronically ill convalescent would be much more believable.

As Shiwu had personally brought him back from death's door before, he had a deeper understanding of Shen Qiao's injuries. Deep down, he was constantly terrified that Shen Qiao might collapse at any moment.

Shen Qiao must have sensed his mood because he stroked the boy's head and asked, "Is Kunye dead?"

Shiwu nodded. "He is. Sect Leader Zhao confirmed it herself."

Shen Qiao released a slow breath of relief.

It wasn’t yet a year since the duel on Banbu Peak, but so many things had happened during that span. When he looked back, it felt just like yesterday.

“Shiwu, if someone handed you over to a cruel and evil man, and that led to the destruction of your foundations and Daoist core, would you hate him?”

Shiwu nodded. “I would.”

“Now, that someone is in great danger. If you stand by and watch him die, many innocent people could end up losing their lives or becoming destitute drifters. Would you save him then?”

Shiwu frowned hard as he thought and thought. It was obvious that this question was a bit too complex and abstract for a boy his age. The most complicated, most tragic thing he’d gone through were the deaths of Zhu Lengquan and Chuyi.

A laugh escaped Shen Qiao. He already knew the answer, so why go and trouble a child over it?

Shiwu was perceptive. He raised his head and asked, “Shizun, are you going to save him? Was he the one who almost got you killed?”

Shen Qiao nodded. He didn’t hide it. “Yes.”

Shiwu was furious. “Someone that cruelhearted doesn’t deserve to be saved!”

Shen Qiao shook his head. “He’s not cruelhearted—he never had a heart in the first place. He treats everyone in the world with the same callousness, and he’ll never be particularly gentle toward anyone. But I didn’t understand that part. I thought that even the hardest of hearts could be thawed one day. I took him for a friend, and I believed that he should do the same. But that belief was unrequited.”

“If you took him for a friend, shouldn’t he take you as his friend too?”

Shen Qiao laughed. “No. In this world there are many, many situations where giving someone something doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll receive anything in return. When you choose to give, you must remember this, or else the only one hurt will be you.”

Somehow, Shiwu felt like there was a deeper meaning to Shen Qiao's words and smile. But he could barely understand what Shen Qiao had told him in the first place, let alone grasp the implications behind the message.

"…That means you're going to go down the mountain to save that man?"

Shen Qiao was silent for a long time. "Yes," he said.

"I'll go with you!" cried Shiwu without the slightest hesitation.

That was the last thing he said to Shen Qiao while conscious.

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Zhao Chiying took a sleeping Shiwu from Shen Qiao's arms. His sleep acupoint had been pressed. "Must you do this?" she sighed.

"Even if you can't bear to part, parting must arrive." said Shen Qiao. "Shiwu is still young, and my journey will be full of dangers. I absolutely cannot let him come with me. He'll understand once he wakes up. I entrust Shiwu to Sect Leader Zhao. Please allow me to apologize once again."

He cupped his hands at Zhao Chiying and bowed deeply.

"Why does Daoist Master Shen insist on doing something so dangerous?" asked Zhao Chiying. "When you know the mountain has tigers, why insist on climbing it? Yuwen Yong may not be an enlightened ruler. No matter how the world changes, it has nothing to do with us. If you focus on cultivating in Bixia Sect, then with your abilities, breaking through the sword heart and attaining the echelon of sword spirit would be just around the corner."

Shen Qiao gave a self-deprecating smile. "There are certain things in this world that a person must do, even if they know it's impossible. Perhaps the results won't be as you wish, but I won't give up as long as a strand of hope remains. Perhaps I'm just foolish and naive."

Zhao Chiying was silent for a while, then heaved a long sigh. "You're not foolish and naive. You know all the dangers and consequences, yet you

go on, unflinching in your pursuit of righteousness. You hold righteousness above all else. I cannot compare to you."

"I'm not as incredible as you think." Shen Qiao shook his head. "I only want to see that man one more time, to see the disappointment on his face. Let him know that the demonic core didn't take, that it didn't control me. That I'm still myself."

Done speaking, he cupped his hands at her, then turned and left the mountain, never looking back.

During his time at Bixia Sect, Shen Qiao had removed his common robes and changed back into the Daoist robe he used to wear every day, a long time ago. His hair was held in place by a jade pin, his white Daoist robe danced in the wind. From afar, he looked like an immortal or a god. It was hard to look away.

Zhao Chiying quietly sent him on his way, and two verses sprang into her heart.

For the ideals I pursue within my heart, I'd not regret a thousand deaths to die.

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Thousand Autumns

VOLUME 3

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APPENDIX

Characters and Associated Factions

CHARACTERS AND ASSOCIATED FACTIONS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

A sizable portion of *Thousand Autumns*' cast are based on real-life historical figures, though they have all been fictionalized to some degree. The names of those with real-life counterparts but without an entry of their own are indicated by **bold text**.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Shen Qiao (沈峤)

Title(s): Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace

Character Basis: Fictional

As the chosen successor of the legendary Qi Fengge, and the reclusive leader of the land's foremost Daoist sect, Shen Qiao seemed to have it all: first-rate talent, a world-class master, a loving family, and a kind heart devoted completely to the tenets of Daoism. But a duel atop Banbu Peak changed everything for him.

The *qiao* in Shen Qiao's name is a rare character, referring to a tall and precipitous mountain peak. He was named after a verse in "Ode to Zhou: On Tour" (周颂·时迈), recorded in the *Shijing*—a song written in commemoration of King Wu of Zhou. The verse extols how he traveled the land after vanquishing the Shang in 11th century B.C.E. He offered sacrifices to the many gods, including those in the rivers and tallest mountains.

Yan Wushi (晏无师)

Title(s): Huanyue Sect Leader, Junior Preceptor of the Crown Prince of Zhou

Character Basis: Fictional

The egotistical and capricious leader of the demonic Huanyue Sect. A terrifying martial artist who some sources claim was on par with Qi Fengge, Yan Wushi is also ambitious, shrewd, and above all, a committed misanthrope. In Yan Wushi's eyes, there are no good people, only evil people disguised as good people. As far as he's concerned, anyone who thinks otherwise is either a liar or a fool.

Yan Wushi's personal name means "has no master."

XUANDU MOUNTAIN (玄都山)

The world's foremost Daoist sect, located on the border intersection of Northern Qi, Southern Chen, and Northern Zhou. Sect Leader Qi Fengge built their legendary reputation, but despite this prestige and influence, he chose to seclude Xuandu Mountain away from the world, closing its gates and withdrawing from all outside affairs. After his death, his mantle passed to Shen Qiao, who held fast to his shizun's isolationist stance. When Shen Qiao fell during his duel with Kunye, Yu Ai took the reins as Acting Sect Leader.

Officially, Xuandu Mountain is a location—the actual sect is called Xuandu's Violet Palace (玄都紫府, *xuandu zifu*), named after Taishang Laojun's abode on the mythical Daluo Mountain. *Xuandu* ("black city") refers to Daluo Mountain's immortal realm, while *zifu* ("violet residence") refers to the Bajing Palace supposedly located within it. The sect leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace is known as the *zhangjiao* (掌教), a term more specific to Daoism compared to *zongzhu* (宗主), which is how Yan Wushi is addressed in Chinese.

Qi Fengge (祁凤阁)

Title(s): Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace, World's Number One Martial Expert

Character Basis: Fictional

The number one martial artist in all the land before his passing and Shen Qiao's master, Qi Fengge is held in high esteem by the entire world to this day. Two decades ago, he won a duel with Hulugu of the Göktürks. In lieu of a reward for his victory, he made Hulugu swear to stay out of the Central Plains for the next twenty years. He had five disciples in total: Tan Yuanchun, Shen Qiao, Yu Ai, an unnamed fourth disciple, and Gu Hengbo.

Yu Ai (郁蔼)

Title(s): Acting Sect Leader of Xuandu's Violet Palace

Character Basis: Fictional

One of Qi Fengge's disciples and Shen Qiao's shidi, though two years older than him. Originally the closest to Shen Qiao out of all his martial siblings, he quickly took over leadership of Xuandu Mountain after Shen Qiao's disastrous duel, and instituted various sweeping reforms.

HUANYUE SECT (浣月宗)

One of the three demonic sects, established and led by Yan Wushi after the collapse of Riyue Sect. Though wealthy and influential, they tend to keep a low profile and are the key supporters of Yuwen Yong's rule in Zhou. Like the rest of the demonic sects, their final goal is to reunite the sects of the demonic discipline.

Yu Shengyan (玉生烟)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yan Wushi's newest disciple. A talented but somewhat naive young man who wholeheartedly believes in Yan Wushi's philosophies.

Bian Yanmei (边沿梅)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yan Wushi's first disciple and Yu Shengyan's shixiong. As shrewd as his master, Bian Yanmei juggled both Huanyue Sect logistics and Zhou imperial court duties as Yan Wushi's representative during his master's seclusion.

HEHUAN SECT (合欢宗)

One of three demonic sects born from Riyue Sect's fall, Hehuan Sect specializes in charm techniques and parasitic cultivation, where the practitioner drains qi and energy from their sexual partners to strengthen their own martial arts. Hehuan Sect was established and led by Yuan Xiuxiu, but her lover Sang Jingxing is known to hold great power within it as well. Highly influential in Qi.

Bai Rong (白茸)

Character Basis: Fictional

One of Hehuan Sect's most prominent disciples under Sang Jingxing. Cunning and devious, she has a very peculiar relationship with Shen Qiao.

Yuan Xiuxiu (元秀秀)

Title(s): Hehuan Sect Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The leader of Hehuan Sect, rumored to have gotten her position due to her relationship with Sang Jingxing. During Yan Wushi's ten years of seclusion, she led Hehuan Sect in repeated attempts to annex Huanyue Sect.

Sang Jingxing (桑景行)

Character Basis: Fictional

An exalted elder in Hehuan Sect, Cui Youwang's disciple, and Yuan Xiuxiu's supposed lover. A twisted martial artist with a horrific reputation, as well as an appetite for beauties and parasitic cultivation.

Xiao Se (萧瑟)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yuan Xiuxiu's disciple. Specializes in fighting with fans.

Yan Shou (阎狩)

Title(s): The Buddha with the Blood-Soaked Hand

Character Basis: Fictional

An elder in Hehuan Sect. Keeps his head shaved like a monk's, but has a reputation for murder.

FAJING SECT (法镜宗)

One of the three demonic sects born from Riyue Sect's fall. Unable to compete with the other two branches, the sect now primarily operates in Tuyuhun. Their sect leader is Guang Lingsan.

Guang Lingsan (广陵散)

Title(s): Fajing Sect Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The leader of Fajing Sect, who moved their operations to Tuyuhun ten years ago.

RIYUE SECT (日月宗)

The origin of the "Noble Discipline" (demonic discipline to outsiders). Once located in Fenglin Province, it vanished after splintering into three: Huanyue Sect, Hehuan Sect, and Fajing Sect. Their last sect leader was Sang Jingxing's master, Cui Youwang.

LIUHE GUILD (六合帮)

One of the largest martial arts organizations in the Central Plains, whose reach extends both north and south of the Yangtze River. Led by guild leader Dou Yanshan and deputy leader Yun Fuyi, they deal in all kinds of business, from escort missions to spy work.

Dou Yanshan (窦燕山)

Title(s): Liuhe Guild Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The leader of the Liuhe Guild. Yan Wushi destroyed the copy of the Zhuyang Strategy that Dou Yanshan ordered the Liuhe Guild to escort.

LINCHUAN ACADEMY (临川学宫)

The leading Confucian sect and the main force backing the Emperor of Chen. Their leader is Academy Master Ruyan Kehui, one of the world's top ten martial artists.

Ruyan Kehui (汝鄢克惠)

Title(s): Linchuan Academy Master

Character Basis: Fictional

The leader of Linchuan Academy. A powerful and cultured martial artist who ranks in the top ten, he believes wholeheartedly in the Han's right to rule.

Xie Xiang (谢湘)

Character Basis: Fictional

Academy Master Ruyan Kehui's favorite disciple, who was sent to Zhou as an envoy. Arrogant but insightful, he has great faith in the Chen Dynasty.

Zhan Ziqian (展子虔)

Character Basis: Historical

Xie Xiang's shixiong who accompanied him to Zhou. Loves to paint.

CHUNYANG MONASTERY (纯阳观)

The Daoist sect led by Yi Pichen, one of the top ten martial artists in the world.

Li Qingyu (李青鱼)

Title(s): One of the Twin Jades of Qingcheng

Character Basis: Fictional

Yi Pichen's beloved final disciple and Su Qiao's shidi, a rising star who shook the world with his martial arts debut at the Jade Terrace Discussion.

BIXIA SECT (碧霞宗)

A Daoist sect located on Zhunan Peak of Mount Tai, it has been slowly waning since the previous generation under Hui Leshan. The current sect leader is his disciple, Zhao Chiying.

Zhao Chiying (赵持盈)

Title(s): Bixia Sect Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The current leader of Bixia Sect and known to be highly talented. Has been in secluded cultivation for a long time, leaving all sect affairs to Yue Kunchi.

Yue Kunchi (岳昆池)

Title(s): Bixia Sect Acting Sect Leader

Character Basis: Fictional

The current acting leader of Bixia Sect and Zhao Chiying's shixiong. A mediocre martial artist who puts all his energies into administration.

Fan Yuanbai (范元白)

Character Basis: Fictional

Yue Kunchi's disciple who was away from Bixia Sect visiting family. On returning, he's greeted with a nasty surprise.

Lu Feng (卢峰)

Character Basis: Fictional

An elder of Bixia Sect who collaborates with Ruan Hailou.

DONGZHOU SECT (东洲派)

A foreign sect that resides in the eastern peninsular kingdom of Goguryeo. Ruan Hailou leads them in a bloody assault on Bixia Sect.

Ruan Hailou (阮海楼)

Character Basis: Fictional

Once a disciple of Bixia Sect and the shidi of former sect leader Hui Leshan. Left for unknown reasons ten years ago, but returns seeking a payment in blood.

QI DYNASTY (齐朝)

Also known as Northern Qi, the country occupies the land northeast of the Yangtze River and was founded by Gao Huan. Originally warlike and

powerful, the reign of Gao Huan's successors, especially the incompetent and frivolous Gao Wei, has put the kingdom into a steady decline. Its capital is Yecheng (located at the south of modern-day Hebei).

Chen Gong (陈恭)

Title(s): Duke of Pengcheng County

Character Basis: Fictional

Once a homeless youth who Shen Qiao met in Funing County, now a duke and Emperor Gao Wei's new favorite.

ZHOU DYNASTY (周朝)

The country that occupies the region northwest of the Yangtze, also known as Northern Zhou. Its capital is Chang'an (now known as Xi'an). Though it was established by **Yuwen Tai** before his death, for years his nephew **Yuwen Hu** held power as regent, killing off Yuwen Tai's puppet-ruler sons whenever he perceived them as a threat. The third such son, **Yuwen Yong**, managed to feign obedience for years before finally ambushing and killing Yuwen Hu, officially seizing back his imperial authority.

Yuwen Yong (宇文邕)

Title(s): Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou

Character Basis: Historical

The reigning, warmongering emperor of Northern Zhou who rose to power after killing his cousin. Possesses a harsh and mistrustful personality, but is a talented statesman who puts all his effort into bolstering Northern Zhou both economically and militarily. As he dislikes all three schools of thought, he works closely with Yan Wushi and Huanyue Sect instead.

Puliuru Jian (普六茹坚)

Character Basis: Historical

A learned, high-ranking official of Zhou whom Shen Qiao met at Madam Qin's birthday banquet.

Su Wei (苏威)

Title(s): Duke of Meiyang County

Character Basis: Historical

The current patriarch of the Su family, Su Wei comes from a distinguished line of scholar-officials and is highly talented himself. His younger brother is Su Qiao, and his mother is Madam Qin.

Madam Qin (秦老夫人)

Title(s): Su Matriarch

Character Basis: Fictional

The matriarch of the prominent Su family of Zhou and mother of the brothers, Su Wei and Su Qiao. Actually Aisaule, a former disciple of Hulugu who absconded with his keepsake twenty years ago.

Yuwen Qing (宇文庆)

Title(s): Court Councilor

Character Basis: Historical

An official from the Yuwen family who travels south as an envoy for the alliance treaty between Zhou and Chen. Lascivious and adores his concubine, Yu Zi.

CHEN DYNASTY (陈朝)

The country south of the Yangtze River, founded by **Chen Baxian**, also called Southern Chen. Unlike Qi and Zhou where most of the upper class are of Xianbei descent, the Chen Dynasty is dominated by the Han. Its

capital is Jiankang (modern-day Nanjing), and the current ruler is Emperor **Chen Xu**.

GÖKTÜRK KHAGANATE (突厥)

A powerful Turkic empire north of the Great Wall, led by **Taspar Khagan**. Their people have been at odds with the nations of the Central Plains for years—relations between them are uneasy and tinged with hostility.

Hulugu (狐鹿估)

Character Basis: Fictional

Once the most powerful martial artist of the Göktürk Khaganate, he was defeated by Qi Fengge twenty years ago. Qi Fengge then made him swear not to set foot in the Central Plains. Before passing away, he asked his disciple, Duan Wenyang, to retrieve his keepsake from Madam Qin.

Kunye (昆邪)

Title(s): Wise King of the Left

Character Basis: Fictional

Hulugu's disciple and said to be the best of the new generation of Göktürk martial artists. *Thousand Autumns* begins when he defeats Shen Qiao and throws him off the cliff at Banbu Peak.

Duan Wenyang (段文鸯)

Character Basis: Fictional

Hulugu's disciple and Kunye's shixiong who came to Northern Zhou at both his late master's and the Khaganate's bequest. A first-class martial artist who specializes in the whip.

Pu Anmi (蒲安密)

Character Basis: Fictional

Kunye's disciple who came to support Ruan Hailou's massacre of Bixia Sect. Like his master, he wields a saber.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Characters who aren't associated with a particular faction, regardless of where they live.

Tao Hongjing (陶弘景)

Character Basis: Historical

The legendary creator of the *Zhuyang Strategy*. Before his death, he was known as a great genius and the one true master of martial arts for his success in marrying the principles of all three schools of thought.

Zhu Lengquan (竺冷泉)

Character Basis: Fictional

The abbot of Bailong Monastery. Has a sharp tongue.

Chuyi (初一)

Character Basis: Fictional

Zhu Lengquan's senior disciple. A mischievous slacker.

Shiwu (十五)

Character Basis: Fictional

Zhu Lengquan's junior disciple. Sweet and shy.

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in “de” in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Thousand Autumns*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING: Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses characters.

CHARACTER NAMES

Qiān Qiū

Qiān, approximately **chee-yen**, but as a single syllable.

Qiū, as in **cho**ke.

Shěn Qiáo

Shěn, as in the second half of ma**son**.

Qiáo, as in **chow**.

Yàn Wúshī

Yàn, as in **yen**.

Wú, as in **oo**.

Shī, a little like **shh**. The **-i** is more of a buzzed continuation for the **sh-** consonant than any equivalent English vowel. See the General Consonants section for more information on the **sh-** consonant.

Qí Fènggé

Qí, as in **chee**se.

Fèng, a little like **fun**, but with the nasal **ng** one would find in so**ng**.

Gé, a little like **guh**.

Bái Róng

Bái, as in **bye**.

Róng, a little like the last part of chape**rone**. See the General Consonants section for more information on the **r-** consonant.

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**eat

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **ds** as in su**ds**

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: very close to **c-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate.

ZH: very close to **z-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate.

SH: very close to **s-**, but with the tongue rolled up to touch the palate. Because of this, it can give the impression of **shh**, but it’s a different sound compared to the **x-** consonant.

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

R: partway between the **r** in **r**un and the **s** in mea**s**ure. The tongue should be rolled up to touch the palate.

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di,” where the first is a buzzed continuation for the sh- consonant and the latter a long e sound. Compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **yo**-yo

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

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APPENDIX

Historical Primer

HISTORICAL PERIOD

While not required reading, this section and those after are intended to offer further context for the historical setting of this story, and give insights into the many concepts and terms utilized throughout the novel. Their goal is to provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

The following segment is intended to give a brief introduction to the major historical events featured in *Thousand Autumns*.

THE JIN DYNASTY

In 266 C.E., at the close of the tumultuous **Three Kingdoms** era, the central plains were finally united under Sima Yan, founder of the **Jin Dynasty**, also known as **Western Jin**. But when Sima Yan passed away in 290 C.E., his son and heir was deemed unfit to rule. Conflict broke out among members of the imperial court who vied for the throne. This became known as the **War of the Eight Princes**, after the eight members of the Sima royal family who were the principal players.

UPRISING OF THE FIVE BARBARIANS AND THE SIXTEEN KINGDOMS PERIOD

Over a period of fifteen years, the repeated clashes and civil wars greatly weakened the Western Jin Dynasty. During this time, most of the royal princes relied on non-Han nomadic minorities to fight for them, in particular Xiongnu and the **Xianbei**. The Han lumped them together with other foreign ethnicities like the Jie, Di, and Qiang, collectively designating them the **Hu**, sometimes translated as “barbarians.” As the Jin Dynasty’s control over these minority tribes slipped, instances of rebellion combined with local unrest to usher in the **Uprising of the Five Barbarians** in 304 C.E.

Although it began as a revolt spearheaded by the Hu, the Uprising of the Five Barbarians soon led to the complete collapse of Western Jin as its Han upper class fled south of the Yangtze River. This was the mass

southward migration of the Jin referenced in *Thousand Autumns*. When the old capital of Chang'an fell, the new emperor reestablished the seat of government in Jiankang, heralding the start of the **Eastern Jin Dynasty**. At the same time, north of the Yangtze River, the Di, Qiang, Xiongnu, and Jie each established their own dynastic kingdoms. Thus began a time of great upheaval known as the **Sixteen Kingdoms** period.

During the turmoil of the Sixteen Kingdoms, regimes formed and collapsed in the blink of an eye as they warred with each other and the Eastern Jin. The strife finally abated when the **Northern Wei Dynasty** conquered the other northern kingdoms in 439 C.E. and unified the lands north of the Yangtze. Meanwhile in the south, Liu Yu usurped the emperor of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and founded the **Liu Song Dynasty**. This marked the beginning of the **Northern-Southern Dynasties** period, during which *Thousand Autumns* is set.

NORTHERN-SOUTHERN DYNASTIES

For a period of almost ninety years, Northern Wei held strong. The first half of their reign was focused on expansion, but when Tuoba Hong rose to power in 471 C.E., he championed the dominance of **Buddhism** and Han culture, going so far as to ban Xianbei clothing from the court and assigning one-character family names to Xianbei nobility (Tuoba Hong himself changed his family name to Yuan).

South of the Yangtze, the regime changed hands three times—from Liu Song to **Southern Qi** to **Liang**, before the **Chen Dynasty** that ruled during *Thousand Autumns* was finally established in 557 C.E.

A rift slowly developed in Northern Wei between the increasingly Han-acculturated aristocracy and their own armies who adhered more to the traditional, nomadic lifestyle. A series of rebellions escalated into all-out revolt, and by 535 C.E. the kingdom had split in half. **Western Wei** was ruled by Yuwen Tai, and **Eastern Wei** by Gao Huan. In the space of a generation, they would depose the last of the old leadership and become the kingdoms of **Northern Zhou** and **Northern Qi**. In the Zhou Dynasty to the west, rule favored the Han-acculturated nobles, while in the Qi Dynasty to the east, the traditional tribes came into power.

Qi's military superiority over both Zhou and Chen began to diminish due to corruption and incompetence in the ruling class, and particularly that of the emperor's grandson, **Gao Wei**. After a politically turbulent period of regency in Zhou, **Yuwen Yong** took power in 572 C.E. and made a point of bolstering state administration and military affairs.

By 575 C.E., where *Thousand Autumns* begins, a new maelstrom is already brewing…

THE THREE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

This section hopes to provide some basic context as to the major schools of thought that inform the background of *Thousand Autumns*, so that readers may explore the topic in more depth on their own. Note that with their long period of coexistence, the schools have all influenced each other deeply, and their ideals have become rooted in Chinese culture itself, even among non-practitioners.

Daoism (道)

Daoism revolves around the concept of **Dao**, or "Ways": the courses things follow as they undergo change. Though there are many Dao a human can choose from, there is one primordial "great Dao" (大道), the source of the universe and origin of all things—the void of infinite potential. The course all things in the universe follow is the "heavenly Dao" (天道), the natural order.

According to Daoist principles, by imposing constraints and artifice, humanity strays from the primordial Dao and stagnates. In particular, the rigid social roles enforced by society are seen as unnatural and an example of degradation. For humans to flourish, they must revert themselves, disengaging from these tendencies in order to return to the primordial Dao. This is sometimes known as "becoming one with heaven" (天人合一). The method of disengaging is called **wuwei** (无为), sometimes translated as inaction or non-interference.

Expanding on this idea, Daoism has the concepts of **Xiantian** (先天, "Early Heaven") and **Houtian** (后天, "Later Heaven"). The prenatal Xiantian state is closer to the primordial Dao, and thus is both purer than and superior to the postnatal Houtian state. The Houtian state is created at birth, along with the **conscious mind** that thinks and perceives and which in turn suppresses the primordial mind. This is what gives rise to sources of suffering: anger, worry, doubt, desire, and fatigue.

The goal of *wuwei* is to reverse the changes brought on by Houtian and return to the primordial state of Xiantian. To conflict with nature is to stray from it, and to intervene in the natural order—as society does—is to perpetuate degradation. Disengaging from all of these influences requires rejecting social conventions and detaching from the mundane world altogether, so seclusion and asceticism are common practices. Emptying oneself of all emotion and freeing oneself from all artifice is the only way to achieve union with heaven and surpass life and death itself.

When it came to politics, Daoism was often seen as a justification for small, *laissez-faire* governments—in fact, *laissez-faire* is one of the possible translations of *wuwei*—supporting low taxes and low intervention. The anti-authority implications of its philosophies were not lost on its followers, nor on their rulers. As a result, it wasn't uncommon for Daoism to struggle to find its footing politically, despite its cultural pervasiveness.

Buddhism (佛/释)

Founded by Gautama Buddha in India, Buddhism only arrived in China during the Han Dynasty, well after Confucianism and Daoism. Despite early pushback and social friction, its parallels with Daoism eventually helped it gain widespread influence.

Buddhism is rooted in the concepts of reincarnation, karma, and **Maya**—the illusion of existence. Attachment to Maya keeps living beings rooted in the cycle of reincarnation, where they are beholden to the principle of karma that determines their future rebirths. Buddha claimed that this eternal cycle is the root of all suffering and that the only escape is through achieving **Nirvana**, or enlightenment. To achieve enlightenment is to fully accept that all things within existence are false. It then follows that

any emotions, attachments, or thoughts that one develops while interacting with and perceiving the world are equally false. This philosophy extends to the attitude toward karma—the ideal Buddhist does good deeds and kind acts without any expectation of reward or satisfaction, material or otherwise.

Despite these selfless ideals, it also wasn't uncommon to see Buddhist temples amass land, authority, and wealth through donations, worship, and the offerings of those seeking better futures or rebirths. Combined with the men who'd leave their homes to join these temples as monks, this sometimes made the relationship between Buddhism and rulers a tricky, precarious one.

Confucianism (儒)

Unlike Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism focuses on the moral betterment of the individual as the foundation for the ideal society. The founder Confucius envisioned a rigidly hierarchical system wherein the lower ranks have the moral duty to obey the higher ranks, and those in superior positions likewise have the moral responsibility to care for their subordinates. This social contract is applied to everything from the family unit to the nation itself—the emperor is the father to his people, and they in turn must show him absolute obedience.

To foster such a society, Confucians extol the **five constant virtues** (五常): **benevolence** (仁), **righteousness** (义), **propriety** (礼), **wisdom** (智), and **integrity** (信). Paragons who embody all five virtues are called **junzi** (君子), sometimes translated as "gentlemen" or "noble men," while their direct opposites are *xiaoren*, literally "petty people," and sometimes translated as "scoundrels."

Throughout most of history, mainstream Confucians believed in the goodness inherent in humanity, that people can better themselves through education and learning from their superiors. The ideal ruler must be the ultimate *junzi* himself and lead by example, thereby uplifting all of society. In the same vein, Confucius expected officials to be virtuous parental figures, held to a higher moral standard than ordinary citizens.

Due to its emphasis on social order, Confucianism was easily the most influential and politically favored of the three schools throughout history. Its social contract was so absolute that even dynastic takeovers had to be performed in a way that did not “break it.” Usurpers who acted otherwise ran the risk of being seen as illegitimate in the eyes of the people. Famously, the old emperor had to offer the new emperor his position multiple times, with the new ruler declining three times (三让) before finally accepting.

Bonus: Legalism (法)

Though not regarded as one of the “big three” and although it received far less overt support, Legalism was enormously influential for one key reason: it served as the foundation for the entire Chinese government tradition for two thousand years, regardless of dynasty.

Unlike the three schools, which are each in pursuit of an ideal, Legalism is entirely utilitarian and concerned only with efficacy. This is reflected in its Chinese name, the “house of methods.” Core to its beliefs is the idea that human nature is selfish and evil, and so people must be motivated through reward and punishment. Morality is inconsequential, the ends justify the means, and the most effective administration must minimize corruption by restricting its subordinate administrators as much as possible.

It was with these tenets that the first unified Chinese empire, the Qin Dynasty, dismantled the existing feudalist system and established in its place a centralized government overseen by the emperor. After the Qin’s collapse—brought about in part due to how harsh a fully Legalist regime was on the people—the succeeding Han Dynasty under Emperor Wu of Han made sure to suppress Legalism as a philosophy. However, they inherited the entire Legalist government structure mostly unchanged, though their policies were softened by a push toward Confucianism. This trend of furtively repackaging Legalist tendencies within the leading school of thought (usually Confucianism) continued almost uninterrupted for this period of two thousand years, and rulers continued to study Legalist texts like the *Han Feizi*.

OTHER IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

DAOIST CULTIVATION, THE ZHUYANG STRATEGY, AND THE POWER OF FIVE

In real life, the scholar Tao Hongjing compiled the famous, three-volume *Concealed Instructions for the Ascent to Perfection* (登真隱訣, translated in the novel as “Dengzhen Concealed Instructions”). For *Thousand Autumns*, Meng Xi Shi invented an extra associated manual, called the *Strategy of Vermillion Yang* (朱陽策, translated in the novel as “Zhuyang Strategy”) after the real-life Monastery of Vermillion Yang on Mount Mao where Tao Hongjing secluded himself.

The *Zhuyang Strategy* draws heavily from classical concepts of Daoist cultivation and pulls together many ideas from Chinese culture. Primarily, they are based on the *Wuqi Chaoyuan* (五气朝元, roughly “Returning the Five Qi to the Origin”). The first lines of each of the *Zhuyang Strategy*’s five volumes correspond exactly to the *Wuqi Chaoyuan*’s five principles:

1. The heart conceals the mind; Houtian begets the conscious mind, while Xiantian begets propriety; once emptied of sorrow, the mind is settled, and the Fire from the Crimson Emperor of the South returns to the Origin.

2. The liver conceals the soul; Houtian begets the lost soul, while Xiantian begets benevolence; once emptied of joy, the soul is settled, and the Wood from the Azure Emperor of the East returns to the Origin.

3. The pancreas conceals the thought; Houtian begets the deluded thought, while Xiantian begets integrity; once emptied of desire, the thought is settled, and the Earth from the Yellow Emperor of the Center returns to the Origin.

4. The lungs conceal the anima; Houtian begets the corrupted anima, while Xiantian begets righteousness; once emptied of rage, the anima is settled, and the Metal from the White Emperor of the West returns to the Origin.

5. The kidneys conceal the essence; Houtian begets the clouded essence, while Xiantian begets wisdom; once emptied of cheer, the will is settled, and the Water from the Black Emperor of the North returns to the Origin.

The traditional Chinese worldview includes the **Five Phases**, the **Deities of the Five Regions** (also known as the **Five Emperors**), the five constant virtues, the **Five Spirits**, and the five major internal organs. The *Wuqi Chaoyuan* links all these ideas together, unifying them into a doctrine that explains how one can achieve immortal status or "godhood." For those who are interested, we provide here a brief introduction to several of these concepts in hopes that readers can further appreciate the world of *Thousand Autumns*.

THE FIVE PHASES

The **Wuxing** (五行), sometimes translated as Five Agents or Five Elements, are a cornerstone of Daoist philosophy. Unlike the Four Elements proposed by Aristotle, the Five Phases—**Metal** (金), **Wood** (木), **Water** (水), **Fire** (火), and **Earth** (土)—are seen as dynamic, interdependent forces. Each phase can give rise to another (生), or suppress another (克). As Daoism dictates that all entities are bound by the natural order, the Five Phases can be seen as an overarching rule set that governs all aspects of nature. Most things are regarded as corresponding to a certain phase, including but not limited to planets, seasons, cardinal directions, organs, colors, and types of qi.

FIVE EMPERORS, FIVE REGIONS, FIVE COLORS

In Daoism, the **Wufang Shangdi** (五方上帝), or High Emperors of the Five Regions, are the fivefold manifestation of the **Supreme Emperor of Heaven** (天皇大帝), or simply **Heaven** (天). As they correspond to the Five Phases, each emperor has an associated cardinal direction, as well as a color that informs his namesake.

FIVE SPIRITS, FIVE ORGANS

The traditional Chinese conception of the spirit divides it into five separate aspects: **mind** (神), **soul** (魂), **thought** (意), **anima** (魄), and **will** (志). These classifications may not be a perfect match with their western definitions. For example, the will—which arises from the **essence** (精)—is responsible for memory, as well as discernment and judgment. A strong will is generally associated with clear-mindedness. In another example, the anima governs instincts, impulses, and reflex reactions, and is said to dissipate on death, unlike the soul.

Each of the five aspects is said to reside in one of the five major internal organs–heart, liver, pancreas (includes the spleen), lungs, and kidneys, which in turn also correspond to the Five Phases. The *Wuqi Chaoyuan* claims that part of ascending to immortality is learning how to "return" the true qi of each aspect to one's Dantian, or "Origin."

THE FOUR OCCUPATIONS

The 士农工商 classification of citizens as *shi* (eventually **gentry scholars**), *nong* (**farmers**), *gong* (**artisans**), and *shang* (**merchants**), was a cornerstone of ancient Chinese social hierarchy strongly asso- ciated with both Confucianism and Legalism.

As the upper class and decision-makers, the *shi* naturally ranked the highest, followed by the peasant farmers who were valued as the backbone of the nation. Merchant businessmen were seen as agents of exploitation who profited from price fluctuations, so they were placed lowest.

In practice, these hierarchical rankings shaped cultural attitudes more than they dictated political clout. Even though merchants were looked down upon, the much-needed cash flow they provided made them far more influential than the artisan and farmer classes. This created a curious situation—merchants were both sought after and derided by the *shi* in charge of governance. In later dynasties some merchants went so far as to purchase positions within the imperial court, making them honorary *shi* and granting them legal protections.

Though the *shi* remained firmly at the top of the social hierarchy regardless of the period, the membership of the class changed over time. Originally, the *shi* were warrior aristocrats not unlike western knights, but they became obsolete when the Warring States period mobilized the common folk for warfare. With the rise of philosophy, the warriors slowly gave way to scholars. Later, during the harsh Legalist regime of the Qin Dynasty, the emperor began assigning administrative responsibilities to learned scholars who showed promise and merit. To weaken the authority of the noble class, he dismantled the existing feudalist system in favor of a centralized bureaucracy of dedicated officials.

Though the Qin's system of governance persisted well after the dynasty's collapse, the importance of family lines meant that prominent scholar-officials effectively became the new aristocracy. Their wealth and influence almost always guaranteed their descendants the resources to land their own positions within the imperial court. *Thousand Autumns* includes examples of powerful clans like the Su and the Xie; one talented ancestor could elevate their entire family for generations to come. It wasn't until the Tang Dynasty that a true merit-based system was introduced—the civil service exams—that would give capable commoners the chance to find their place in governance.

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APPENDIX

Glossary

GLOSSARY

GENRES

Danmei (耽美, “indulgence in beauty”): A Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys’ love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot rather than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia (武侠, “martial heroes”): One of the oldest Chinese literary genres and usually consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, & TITLES

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning “eldest.”

-er: A word for “son” or “child.” When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection.

Xiao-: A prefix meaning “small” or “youngest.” When added to a name, it expresses affection.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shixiong: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. When not bound by sect, speakers may also append "-xiong" as a suffix for names, as a friendly but courteous way of addressing a man of equal rank.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect. When not bound by sect, speakers may also append "-di" as a friendly suffix to names, with "-laodi" being a more casual variant.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shizhi: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker's martial sibling.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Other

Gongzi: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

Lang: A general term for "man." "-lang" can be appended as a suffix for a woman's male lover or husband, but it can also be used to politely address a man by pairing it with other characters that denote his place within a certain family. For example, "dalang," "erlang," and "sanlang" mean "eldest son," "second son," and "third son" respectively. "Langjun" is a polite address for any man, similar to "gentleman."

Niangzi: A polite address for young women, similar to “maiden.”

Xiansheng: A polite address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

Xiongzhang: A very respectful address for an older man the speaker is close to. Approximately means “esteemed elder brother.”

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TERMINOLOGY

Face (脸/面子): A person's face is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for someone's reputation or dignity and can be extended into further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation damaged.

Internal Cultivation (内功): Internal cultivation or *neigong* refers to the breathing, qi, and meditation practices a martial artist must undertake in order to properly harness and utilize their "outer cultivation" of combat techniques and footwork. As Daoism considers qi and breathing irrevocably linked, a large part of internal cultivation centers on achieving the advanced state of **internal breathing** (内息). Practitioners focus on regulating and coordinating their breaths until it becomes second nature. This then grants them the ability to freely manipulate their qi with little effort or conscious thought.

In wuxia, the capabilities of internal cultivation are usually exaggerated. Martial artists are often portrayed as being able to fly with qinggong, generate powerful force fields, manipulate objects across space without physical contact, or harden their bodies and make themselves impervious to physical damage.

Jianghu (江湖, "rivers and lakes"): A staple of wuxia, the jianghu describes the greater underground society of martial artists and associates that spans the entire setting. Members of the jianghu self-govern and settle issues among themselves based on the tenets of strength and honor, though this may not stop them from exerting influence over conventional society too.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a bloodstream. Some medical and combat techniques target the meridians at

specific points on the body, known as acupoints, which allows them to redirect, manipulate, or halt qi circulation. Halting a cultivator's qi circulation prevents them from using their internal cultivation until the block is lifted.

Names: When men and women came of age in ancient China, they received a new name for others of the same generation to refer to them by, known as a **courtesy name**. Use of their original or **personal name** was normally reserved only for respected elders and the person themselves—using it otherwise would be very rude and overfamiliar.

Using an emperor's personal name was even more disrespectful. Rulers were usually addressed by the dynasty they led, and they each had a formal title to distinguish themselves from their predecessors or successors. For example, Yuwen Yong's official title was "Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou" (北周武帝).

Pair Cultivation (双修): Also translated as dual cultivation, this is a cultivation practice that uses sex between participants to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Parasitic Cultivation (采补, "harvest and supplement"): The practice of draining life energy and qi from a host to strengthen one's martial arts. As the bodies of men are believed to hold more *yang* qi while women hold more *yin* qi, the person in question will often "harvest" from the other sex to "supplement" themselves, which gives the practice its association with sexual cultivation.

Qinggong (轻功): A real-life training discipline. In wuxia, the feats of qinggong are highly exaggerated, allowing practitioners to glide through the air, run straight up walls and over water, jump through trees, or travel dozens of steps in an instant.

Seclusion (闭关): Also known as “closed door meditation,” seclusion or secluded cultivation is when a martial artist isolates themselves from the rest of the world to meditate and further their internal cultivation for the purpose of healing injuries or taking their martial arts to the next level.

True Qi and Cores: True qi (真气) is a more precise term for the “qi” commonly seen in Chinese media. In Daoism, one’s true qi or life force is believed to be the fusion of Xiantian qi and Houtian qi.

True qi is refined in the lower Dantian (丹田, “elixir field”) within the abdomen, which also holds the foundations of a person’s martial arts, called the core. In *Thousand Autumns*, Daoist cores and demonic cores are mentioned, differentiated by the discipline (and hence Dao) the practitioner chose. All internal cultivation and breathing builds off these foundations—losing or destroying them is tantamount to losing all of one’s martial arts.

In wuxia, a practitioner with superb internal cultivation can perform superhuman feats with their true qi. On top of what is covered under internal cultivation above, martial artists can channel true qi into swords to generate sword qi, imbue simple movements and objects with destructive energy, project their voices across great distances, heal lesser injuries, or enhance the five senses.

Yin and Yang (阴阳): In Daoism, the concept of *yin* and *yang* is another set of complementary, interdependent forces that govern the cosmos. It represents the duality present in many aspects of nature, such as dark and light, earth and heaven, or female and male. *Yin* is the passive principle, while *yang* is the active one.

Warring States Period: An era in ancient Chinese history characterized by heavy military activity between seven dominant states. The rise of schools of thought like Daoism, Confucianism, and Legalism was partially in response to the extreme turmoil and suffering that were rampant during this time. It lasted from around 475 B.C.E. to 221 B.C.E.,

when the Qin state annexed the rest and established the first unified Chinese empire: the Qin Dynasty.

Weiqi (围棋): Also known by its Japanese name, *go*. Sometimes called “Chinese chess,” it is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Zoroastrianism: A religion from ancient Persia founded by the prophet Zoroaster.

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About the Author

Foolish A-Qiao,

When have I ever

been good to you?

- Meng Xi Shi

Meng Xi Shi is a renowned web author whose works of fiction combine detailed research with witty writing, winning the hearts of readers around the world. Her works are published in China by Jingjiang Literature City. She goes by “Meng Xi Shi Ya” on Weibo.

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Footnotes

1. The title of a leader of the Göktürk Khaganate.

2. 采补. Literally “harvest and supplement,” this is the practice of draining life energy and qi from a host to strengthen one’s martial arts. Often associated with sexual cultivation.

3. In traditional Chinese medicine, eating a specific organ would strengthen that same organ, so it was believed that eating guts would give one courage.

4. Xu Fu, later conferred the title of “Marquis of Ci” by Emperor Gaozu of Han, was an alchemist for the first emperor of Qin, Qin Shi Huang. Famous for exploring the eastern seas for the elixir of life on Qin Shi Huang’s request.

5. Reflects the Daoist belief that the balance of the Five Phases is important to one’s health.

6. 未央宫, 长乐宫. The Endless Palace and Palace of Lasting Joy were built by Emperor Gaozu of Han. Their historic sites can still be visited today.

7. In 515 C.E., a monk named Faqing led 50,000 men in a revolt, claiming that killing would allow them to reach higher stages of enlightenment.

8. 营卫气血. Nutrition, bodily defenses (includes the immune system), qi, and blood were believed to form the cornerstone of a person’s

health.

9. An ancient Korean dynasty.

10. An ancient Vietnamese dynasty.

11. A mountain range located primarily in Tajikistan. The name “Pamir Mountains” didn’t exist in the time of Thousand Autumns, but the translation uses the term for simplicity’s sake.

12. Kingdoms that made up ancient Korea. “Goguryeo” itself became the namesake for “Korea.”

13. 睡穴. An acupoint that can induce sleep in the victim when struck.

14. 双修. Sometimes translated as dual cultivation, this is a cultivation practice that uses sex be-tween participants to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

15. A famous ancient Chinese poem usually attributed to Qu Yuan, dating back to the Warring States period.

16. 坐化. Refers to the practice of Buddhist monks observing asceticism to the point of death. The monk’s body will begin mummifying even while alive, and they eventually pass away in a seated position.

17. 走火入魔. Refers to a situation where one’s cultivation enters a dangerous, highly volatile state. Heavily damaging to the body and can be

fatal.

18. 一尺雪. A white variant of the Chinese peony. In ancient times, peonies were gifted to lovers much like roses are today.

19. 丹田. Refers to the lower abdomen, which houses the martial artist's foundations and where true qi is believed to be refined.

20. From "Kushu Fu," written by poet and politician Yu Xin of Northern Zhou.

21. 师侄. Literally "martial nephew," though it can be used for women as well. For the disciple of someone's martial sibling.

22. As Shanhe Tongbei means "the mountains and rivers grieve in tandem," it's implied that this poem is the namesake of Shen Qiao's sword.

23. 师. Literally "master." Because Shiwu hasn't officially accepted Shen Qiao as his master, he uses this as a suffix to show his respect instead.

24. 师叔祖. Literally "martial great uncle." For the martial sibling of your master's master.

25. Another word for the yin-yang symbol.

26. 师祖. Literally "martial grandfather." For addressing your master's master.

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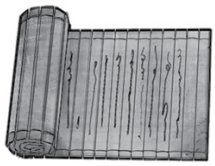

A Pawn
in Grander Games
As emperors, generals, and kings vie for dominance, martial sects mount bloody clashes to determine who will influence the nations' leaders. Fallen and humbled, former sect leader Shen Qiao searches for direction in a tumultuous world. He finds an unlikely companion in the nefarious Yan Wushi.
The roguish and powerful demonic practitioner has helped Shen Qiao begin to rebuild his lost martial abilities. As the two travel and work together, the gentle Daoist master dares to imagine that the famed Demon Lord is warming to him. But all is not as it seems, and old treacheries draw fresh blood. As Shen Qiao confronts dangerous new enemies, the struggle for control of the Central Plains ignites!
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